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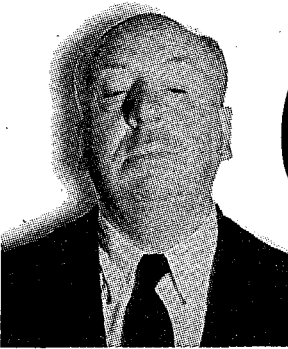
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

DETECTIVES, SPIES, GANGSTERS AND P.I.'S

We begin this month with a happy congratulations to Michael Wiecek, whose AHMM story "A Death in Ueno" (March 2005) received the Shamus award for Best P.I. Short Story from the Private Eye Writers of America. As usual, the PWA held its annual awards banquet to coincide with Bouchercon, held this year in Madison, Wisconsin.

Detectives of all sorts are well represented in this month's issue as well, among them Ron Goulart's endearing accidental sleuths, Casey and Wes Goodhill in "Dickie Danger, Boy Detective"; Edward D. Hoch's Detective Annie Sears, who is starting a new job in San Diego in "First Blood"; and M. J. Jones's Alphonse "Al" Capone (who knew?), who pieces together the clues to the odd deaths at a rival's dinner party in "Ten Little Gangsters." This issue also features such criminal activities as a duel (David Linzee's "Bloody Island") and petty theft (J. M. Gregson's "Exploitation") and such suspicious characters as a heartbreaker haunting a traveling salesman (Dave Zeltserman's "Dave Stevens, I Presume?") and a freelance operative navigating post Cold War alliances (John C. Boland's "Marley's Package"). Dan Crawford's itinerant minstrel Polijn meets an outlaw ghost in "Emeralds? Oh, Those Emeralds." Our cover story is "The Limner's Masterpiece," Janice Law's touching tale of an artist who is called on to create a mortuary portrait of a child.

And finally, we are delighted to announce that AHMM will be teaming up with the Wolfe Pack, the official Nero Wolfe society, to offer a new literary prize, the Black Orchid Novella Award. The Black Orchid is open to original, unpublished novellas that emphasize the deductive skills of the sleuth.

Novellas, like teenagers, can be awkward. Between a novel and a short story in length, they are gawky and difficult to publish. But like teenagers, they often have style and psychological subtlety. Rex Stout (1886–1975) was a master of this difficult form, and he often employed it when writing about his brilliant, irascible, and corpulent private detective Nero Wolfe, lover of food, beer, and orchids. We are delighted to join with the Wolfe Pack in sponsoring an award that will honor Stout's contributions to the genre.

The winner will be published here in our pages, but submissions are to be sent to the Wolfe Pack (not to AHMM). For more on the contest, including word length, submission instructions, and deadlines, visit the Wolfe Pack's Web site at www.nerowolfe.org.

BLOODY ISLAND

DAVID LINZEE

Ezra Smithson had been in St. Louis for only a week when he was called upon to act as second in a duel. He accepted at once—but not because he approved of the practice. A New Englander born and bred, he thought that dueling was a godless and foolish custom. Most St. Louisans who were like himself—that was to say, sober, ambitious men from the East, come to seek their fortunes in the great city of the West—agreed with him. It was the old St. Louisans, the descendants of the French who had founded the city, with their airs and graces and licentiousness, who truly relished a duel.

No, Ezra accepted because here was a chance to do good and to make good at the same time. All he had to do was prevent the duel. Virtue would be served because he would save young Peter Aubertin from killing a man—or, more likely, being killed himself. And Ezra's professional prospects would be greatly enhanced. The old lawyer for whom Ezra clerked had told him that there was nothing like getting your man out of a duel to make your name as an attorney. Business would come your way. The doors of the best houses would open to you.

In St. Louis, Ezra's employer went on, twenty challenges were issued for every duel that was actually fought. Men usually began to regret a challenge the morning after they made one. Then it was up to their seconds to find a way to avoid the fatal appointment—while preserving honor on both sides, of course.

It ought to be easy enough in this case, or so Ezra thought at first. His principal, Peter Aubertin, had never been in a duel before, though he had read about them. The two lived in the same lodging house, and Peter was a gentle, bookish fellow. Reading poetry by candlelight had ruined his eyesight; at twenty paces, he would hardly be able to see his opponent. It would be simple enough to persuade him to apologize for his offense.

That offense was that, arriving at the door of the Planter's House hotel simultaneously with a man named Jack Carnaby, Peter had entered first. For this, Carnaby had challenged him.

Here was a prime bit of foolishness; in St. Louis you did not challenge a man unless he beat you in an election or bested you in a business deal or insulted you in a newspaper. By now, Carnaby's temper had had plenty of time to cool, and he would accept the apology and withdraw the challenge.

So Ezra thought. He was sadly disappointed. Neither principal seemed amenable to reason, and the opposing second, Major Masters, proved a difficult man to deal with. The days fled by. It seemed that this was going to be the one in twenty duels that actually took place, covering Ezra with discredit and putting Peter in his grave. Then, on the very eve of the duel, Ezra hit upon a new idea.

Peter Aubertin looked up from his book as Ezra stepped in the doorway of his room. "Ah, there you are, boy," he said. "You may take this tray away."

"It's Ezra."

Peter squinted through his gold-rimmed spectacles. "My dear fellow, I'm sorry. Would you like some cold chicken?"

Ezra looked at the untouched meal. Though his manner was as pleasant as ever, Peter was in an agony of dread. He had to be. At dawn they would row over to the place selected for the meeting, an uninhabited island in the middle of the Mississippi River, where so many duels had been fought that it was called Bloody Island.

"Peter, have you ever heard of the practice of deloping?"

"Of what?"

"Deloping. It is quite the fashion among duelists in Paris, or so I read in the newspaper. It means missing your opponent on purpose."

"Thus ensuring your own death?"

"Well, the preferred form is the double delopement, in which you both agree to aim wide of each other."

"You mean we row out to this island, grasp our pistols, take our positions, and deliberately miss each other? What's the point of that?"

"Honor is satisfied. I assure you it is the custom in Paris."

For a moment, hope shone in Peter's eyes. Then he shook his head. "Carnaby and Masters will laugh at you. Again."

"Perhaps. But if I tell them that you agree, they will—"

"Be perfectly certain that I am a coward. No, thank you, Ezra. I shall ask no special consideration of Mr. Carnaby." Peter raised his book until the tip of his nose almost touched the page. "May I beg you to leave me to *Ivanhoe*? I am hoping to finish it tonight."

It was not the excitement of the story that caused the book to

shake in his hand. Poor Peter was terrified, yet he kept up this façade of unconcern. It was admirable, it was gallant, and it made Ezra want to pour a basin of cold water over his head.

Turning away, he put on his hat. "I shall go see Major Masters."

"Poor Ezra," Peter said. "I would not have asked you to act for me if I'd known you were going to take so much trouble over it."

Ezra went directly to the Planter's House hotel, where Carnaby and his second were staying. He was prepared to keep going back and forth between the duelists through the night. Perhaps the tolling of church bells marking the steady progress of the hours and at last the lightening of the eastern sky would add force to his arguments.

As he entered the hotel, he could hear Carnaby's loud drawling voice and hearty laugh. He would be drinking and playing cards with friends in the drawing room. And winning, probably. Jack Carnaby was one of those men who were good at everything. Ladies praised his dancing; men praised his cardplaying, horsemanship, and shooting. He hunted regularly on his vast plantation in Mississippi and was a crack shot. So Ezra had heard; he had never been permitted to speak to Carnaby. That would have been improper, and Carnaby's second, Major Masters, was a stickler for form.

Masters was a flinty veteran of the Indian wars who had acted as second in numerous duels, as well as fighting a few himself, in each case killing his opponent. It seemed to Ezra that he was determined to see blood shed in this one. He responded to the double delopement as scornfully as Peter had predicted. Ezra's insistence that he inform Carnaby of the offer put the Major entirely out of countenance. He rose and strode about the room, vigorously working a cheekful of tobacco. Finally, he spat it ringingly into a cuspidor and turned to confront Ezra.

"You're a damned tedious scrivener," he said. "I suppose the only way to stop you talking till dawn is to tell you the truth. This duel cannot be prevented."

Ezra burst out, "I fail to see why any man should die over the question of who goes through a door first!"

"That is only a pretext." Master's usual glare was softened by a certain amusement. "You have lately arrived from Boston, have you not? You don't know how things are done here."

"A pretext?"

"Mr. Carnaby has a far more serious grievance against Aubertin. But he cannot make it public knowledge or he would endanger the reputation of a lady—of the lady he is most honor-bound to protect."

"Of what are you talking? Peter has told me nothing—"

"I shall explain. But I warn you, what I say stays in this room, or you will answer to me."

Ezra's heart was beating faster, but he replied evenly, "I am not in the habit, sir, either of giving away confidences or of fighting duels."

The major tucked more tobacco into his cheek. "Mr. Carnaby is engaged to Mlle. De Baliviere."

Ezra nodded; he had heard of this. The De Balivieres were one of the oldest families in St. Louis, and Mademoiselle was reputed to be a great beauty.

"Your principal, Peter Aubertin, had an earlier attachment to her. He has failed to take his dismissal like a man. Most dishonorably, he has continued to opportune her. Mademoiselle finds him vexing. People are beginning to talk. Aubertin has become a nuisance."

"And for that, Carnaby is going to kill him?"

"Yes. Unless he flees the city." Masters smiled. "You've got hold of the wrong idea, scrivener. Deloping won't serve. Galloping—that's the course to suggest to your principal."

As he walked up the street, Ezra's heart was in his boots. His attempts to prevent this duel had been foredoomed. All Peter ever wanted from a second was someone to row his corpse back from Bloody Island. He had not even seen fit to tell Ezra about Mlle. De Baliviere. In the novels and poems Peter doted on, a man did not cease to love a woman when she chose a richer suitor over him. Nor did he shrink from a challenge, nor flee to save his skin.

A man was blocking his path. Ezra raised his walking stick to defend himself, for at this hour there was no one on the streets of St. Louis but river rats and thieves.

The man grinned, splitting open a face that was tanned as dark as wood to show large white teeth. He spoke loudly and excitedly. Ezra could not understand. He was grateful, anyway, that the man seemed friendly, for he was a formidable figure.

He wore a coonskin cap and fringed buckskins and boots. His pungent smell enveloped Ezra. The strongest components were tobacco and bear grease, which the woodsmen smeared all over their bodies to protect themselves from mosquitoes. On his belt he carried a long knife and pistol. He continued to smile and speak and gesture, and eventually Ezra grasped that the man was inviting him into the house across the street. It was his house, and his name was Antoine De Baliviere.

It was a strange contrast between this reeking woodsman and the elegant mansion behind him, its French windows alight with chandeliers. But this was the way the old Creole families had been

living since they founded St. Louis. They sent their young men upriver into Indian country to trap and trade and to bring home boatloads of invaluable furs that allowed the white-haired seigneurs to set their tables with lace and crystal, and the ladies to order their gowns from Paris.

Ezra had no use for the old families. Gradually but steadily, St. Louis was being taken from them by men from back East—true Americans like himself. This young trapper could probably speak French and several Indian tongues better than he could English. In time, it became clear that it was his sister who had sent him out into the street. She wanted a word with Ezra.

He was shocked that she would summon him in this high-handed fashion. It would be the height of impropriety for a lady to meet with a man at this hour, let alone for a lady who was the cause of a duel to meet with a second. Major Masters had threatened him with a challenge if he so much as talked about her. Turning to look at the house, he could actually see the figure of Mlle. De Baliviere in an upper window. She must have heard that he was trying to prevent the duel and was worried that he had succeeded. A vain Creole lady would naturally be gratified to think of two men fighting to the death for her.

It was in Ezra's power to assure her that the duel would go as she pleased. Her rich, masterful fiancé was going to kill her poor rejected suitor. But let her be anxious, Ezra thought: Peter was going to lose his life; let her lose a night's sleep.

He told the trapper to stand aside. But the fellow did not seem to understand. His sister wished to see Ezra and was used to having her wishes met. Ezra thought it might well come to blows. But at last he was able to break free, leaving the trapper staring after him.

The morning mist lay heavily over the Mississippi as Ezra rowed Peter Aubertin across to Bloody Island. It was dissipating, and with it, Ezra's last hope: Only a mist so thick it would make Peter as much of a blur to Carnaby as Carnaby would be to him could save his friend now. Peter's composure seemed to be unruffled by last hopes. He sat upright in the stern as Ezra labored at the oars, his eyes closed, his lips moving slightly, and whether he prayed or recited poetry or merely repeated the name of his beloved, the heartless Mlle. De Baliviere, Ezra knew not.

After dragging their boat onto the muddy bank, they walked to the clearing in the willows where Carnaby, Masters, and the surgeon were waiting. This was Ezra's first good look at the Mississippian, and he was as tall, broad shouldered, and handsome

as he was reputed to be. He was also swaying slightly. In the course of last night's revels he must have drunk a bit too much of the punch for which the Planter's House was famous. Drawing nearer, Ezra saw that Carnaby's face was fish-belly white, his eyes wide and staring.

His condition stirred Ezra's hopes. Now that the moment had come, he seemed to have lost his appetite for the duel. Perhaps he had been hoping that Peter would flee. Ezra decided to make one last attempt. But before he could speak, Masters intervened. He was determined to move the business along briskly to its bloody conclusion. Grasping Ezra's arm, he dragged him over to a small, rickety table, where the pistols in their velvet-lined case rested beside the surgeon's instruments. To see the implements for tending a wound set out next to the ones for inflicting it filled Ezra with revulsion. He said, loudly enough for Carnaby to hear, "Major, have you thought further on the delopement?"

"No," said Masters. "There is no need to shout, scrivener. There is no need to talk at all. Just load this pistol."

"Bloodshed can still be avoided," Ezra said, just as loudly. "We are quite willing on our side."

Carnaby was standing a few paces off, swaying and staring at the ground. Now he looked up. "Masters, come here."

Masters glanced irritably at Ezra. Putting down pistol and powder horn, he went over to his principal. They spoke so quietly that Ezra, who was straining to hear, could not. The whispering grew more vehement, and abruptly Carnaby burst out, "Damn your eyes, you old buzzard! You will do as I tell you, and right now!"

It was a tone Carnaby might have used to one of the field hands on his plantation, and Masters withered under it. He gave a jerky little bow and walked back to Ezra. "My principal declares that his honor will be satisfied by a double delopement," he said.

Ezra wanted to shout for joy. But the expression on Masters's face made him contain himself. The major's features were twisted with anger and shame. Carnaby had treated him not as a second, but as a servant. In this moment of extreme pressure, Ezra thought, handsome, jovial Jack Carnaby had shown his true nature.

Ezra bowed and walked over to his principal. He told Peter that he and Carnaby were going to miss each other. When Peter did not respond, Ezra was afraid for a moment that he was going to reject the agreement. But in fact Peter was simply stunned: He had been so certain that his last moment was at hand that he could not believe he was going to live. He gripped Ezra's arm and beamed at him with gratitude that made all Ezra's troubles worthwhile. It

crossed Ezra's mind that his friend's composure had never faltered throughout this ordeal. He was a far braver man than Carnaby.

Masters took charge of the final arrangements, though his face was still flushed from his humiliation. In a few moments, Peter and Carnaby were standing on their marks twenty paces apart. Masters took his position beside Ezra and the surgeon and gave the commands in a voice that rang across the sunny clearing.

Ezra was watching Carnaby as the order to fire was given and was relieved to see him swinging his arm well to the left as he raised it. He and Peter fired at the same moment. Ezra, who was unused to gunshots, winced and shut his eyes. When he opened them, it was to see Jack Carnaby stagger and drop his pistol to clutch at the bloody hole in his shirt.

He toppled over backward.

Ezra swung round to Peter, who stood blinking in the sunshine, lowering his smoking pistol. "Peter—good God—"

"But I did as you said! I aimed wide."

The surgeon and Masters knelt over the fallen man. A moment later the surgeon was standing, shaking his head. Masters rose more slowly. He looked at the motionless Peter, then turned upon Ezra. "Well? What do you have to say for yourself now?"

Ezra opened his hands. "I do not know what happened."

Masters smiled. "It seems obvious enough."

"We must go at once to the sheriff," said Ezra, turning toward the boats.

"Bloody Island is not in the sheriff's jurisdiction."

"What?"

"We are in the middle of the river, on an island unclaimed by either Missouri or Illinois. That is why duels are fought here. But surely you knew that. You were counting upon it when you laid your scheme."

"I was only trying—"

"It is a second's duty to protect his principal from foul play on the dueling ground," Masters said. "If he fails in that, he must not allow the murderers to escape. Doctor, I'll trouble you to reload the pistols."

"I will not duel with you."

"Then I'll shoot you where you stand." From under his coat, Masters drew a Colt revolver.

"Put that up, sir," said Ezra, hoping Masters did not hear the quaver in his voice. "I mean to find out what is going on here. Peter, are you sure—"

"I swear to you, Ezra, I did not shoot him."

Masters laughed. "Who did, then?"

"Who, indeed?" muttered Ezra. He stepped over until he was in line with Carnaby's upturned bootsoles. Then he started walking toward a distant line of willows.

"Stop right there!" Masters called after him. "You think I'll let you go back to St. Louis, where you can hide or delay?"

"Our boats are in the opposite direction," said Ezra over his shoulder.

"Not a step farther," Masters shouted.

Ezra walked on, his skin prickling. He did not think that Masters would shoot him in the back. He reached the line of willows, parted their greenery, and stepped through.

On the other side was the far shore of the island. A man in buckskins was pushing a small boat off the mudbank. In his free hand he held a long rifle. Smoke still curled from its barrel. When the man turned to look at him, Ezra recognized the man who had waylaid him last night, Mlle. De Baliviere's brother Antoine.

It must be the lady herself who was sitting in the boat, then. Her voluminous skirts hung over the sides of the tiny vessel. A broad-brimmed hat shaded her face. She was at the oars. But then she would have to be; her brother could not row because he needed steady hands for his shot.

"Pray come with me, the both of you," Ezra said. He hoped there was more steadiness in his tone than he actually felt.

He expected resistance and wondered what he would do. But the brother and sister exchanged a look, and she extended her hand to him for help in disembarking. When she was standing he could see under the hat brim, and she was as beautiful as repute held her to be. She met his gaze boldly, and Ezra, discomposed, turned to lead the way back. Antoine used his long rifle to part the willow branches for his sister to step through.

The three men stared at them as they approached. Masters was the first to find his voice. "Mademoiselle! Good God, Smithson. What abomination will you commit next? Bringing a woman onto the dueling ground?" Stripping off his coat, he threw it over Jack Carnaby's face. Mlle. De Baliviere had not glanced at the fallen man. Her gaze had fixed on Peter Aubertin. She smiled, her color rising. And Ezra wondered why had he assumed, all along, that Peter's love was unrequited.

"Mr. Smithson did not bring me," she said. "I came on my own." Her accent was lovely. Ezra's surname had never sounded so beguiling to him.

"A dueling ground is no place for a lady," Masters repeated.

She gave a shrug of disdain. "But I am the cause of the duel," she said. "What a terrible position to be in! I would have stopped it if

I could, but you men would not speak to me. None of you."

She glanced at Ezra. So that was what she wanted to talk to him about last night. He said, "I apologize, Mademoiselle. I had entirely the wrong idea of you."

"And did you think I would stand by and allow the man I love to be murdered by a man I hate?"

She looked at Peter, who was gazing raptly at her and probably not taking in what was being said. The outcome of the duel—that he was still standing upright with the warm sun on his face and Mlle. De Baliviere declaring her love for him—suited him well, and he was not much interested in how it had come about.

But Masters was. Only now did he fully understand. He looked from the woman to her brother. His gaze settled on the long rifle. "You hid and shot Jack down. Coward!"

Antoine said nothing.

The major had not put away his Colt. His was the only loaded weapon on the island, Ezra realized. He said, with as much firmness as he could muster, "We will have no more shooting. Mademoiselle, the killing was unnecessary. A double delopement was agreed upon at the last moment."

She knew what the term meant, for her cheek grew pale. The brother and sister spoke in French, rapidly and heatedly. To Ezra she said, "Then I am sorry. My brother did not understand what you were saying."

Masters was slowly shaking his head. "I think your brother understood very well what was going on. Your parents had promised you to Jack. They wanted his cotton plantation in the family. And if he came back from Bloody Island alive, you would have had to marry him. Your brother did not want that."

"He did not understand! The distance—and his English—"

"I understood all you were saying," said Antoine abruptly, in heavily accented but fluent English. "Carnaby wanted to kill Peter. He would have done it, but at the last minute he was too much of a coward. That does not entitle him to wed my sister."

"You have broken the code," Masters said. "You have interfered in an affair of honor in the most blackguardly fashion, and you will pay." He raised his Colt and aimed it at Antoine.

"No!" Ezra roared. He stepped between them and grasped Masters's wrist.

"Get out of the way, scrivener. I'll deal with you later."

"But you are proposing a duel, Major, are you not? Then I must act as M. De Baliviere's second."

"There is no need for seconds, blast you!" bellowed the major. "This man is a murderer!"

"We are the challenged party," Ezra said, "and have choice of weapons. Come, Major. You are such a stickler for the code of honor."

"Very well! Give the man a pistol, and then I will blow out his brains!"

"No, we choose rifles and set the distance at—" He squinted at the line of willows, calculating the range at which Antoine had just put a bullet through Carnaby's heart. "—one hundred paces."

Mlle. De Baliviere raised her eyebrows. Her brother smiled at Major Masters. Masters took in the smile, and the long rifle. He glanced at the willows, then back at the body of Jack Carnaby. He swallowed hard and turned his back. After a moment, he shoved the Colt into its holster.

Ezra took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. At least he had prevented one duel today. "Doctor," he said, "perhaps you would assist the Major with the body."

"We are grateful, Mr. Smithson," said Mademoiselle.

"I think you and your brother had better return to your boat and go on your way," Ezra told her. "There will be a crowd waiting on the levee for Peter and me, to hear about the duel."

With difficulty, Peter wrested his gaze from his beloved. A look of perplexity came over his face. "But what shall we tell them?"

"As little as possible," Ezra replied. He remembered that he had first involved himself in this duel to make a name for himself. He thought that in future he would leave seconding in duels to other men. 🐦



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DICKIE DANGER, BOY DETECTIVE

RON GOULART

The heavy oaken door of the Mission-style mansion high in the hills above Hollywood swung violently open and then slammed violently shut. A very pretty, dark-haired young woman came marching down the red brick steps, a hastily packed backpack dangling by its strap from her left hand. Twilight was fading toward night.

As she pushed by the couple who'd just arrived at the foot of the twenty-step stairway, she smiled briefly and said, "Hi, Casey, hi, Wes," then started along the wide, white gravel drive toward the Mission-style five-car garage.

"Leaving him again, Natalie?" Casey Goodhill inquired of the retreating woman.

"For good this time. He's an egotistic, thoughtless schmuck," replied Natalie Thaxter without looking back. "Nice seeing you guys again." She went striding into the garage.

"How many times is it this year so far?" asked Wes Goodhill, as he and his blond wife began their ascent to the front door.

"I think six."

"Sure it's not eight?"

"Oh, you're counting the two times she only got as far as the gates of the estate and came back."

"Hey, you pack a bag, walk out and slam the door, hop in your Mercedes, and travel as far as the gates," said Wes, "that's leaving your husband."

"Legally, I bet you have to be away for more than fifteen minutes before it's considered desertion." They'd arrived at the door, and Casey turned to watch a silvery sports car come roaring out of the garage. "She's taking the Jaguar tonight."

"That's because the Mercedes is in the shop again. Seems she drove it into—"

"Nat's always letting me down," announced the slightly plump, thirty-seven-year-old man, who'd yanked the door open.



"A formerly great writer of bestselling cookbooks, a terrific gourmet chef—at the rare times when she's in residence—and a very successful and sought-after petite fashion model back in her teens, but . . ." He paused to

**"I'm being blackmailed
by a dead man."**

tap his chest at the third button of his plaid shirt. "But lacking in heart and sympathy. Whenever I

face a crisis, and believe me a topflight voice-over man like me faces many of them, she—"

"She's actually driving through the gates this time, Burt." Casey was looking off into the gathering darkness.

"My life will be better and simpler without her." Burt Thaxter stepped back and opened the heavy door wider.

"You asked us to drop over tonight, Burt, because you said you had a serious business problem you wanted to talk over," Wes reminded the plump actor. "I hope it's not really about your latest breakup with Natalie."

"Over the phone this afternoon," added Casey, "you implied that this wasn't about another domestic crisis. Natalie always comes back in time, so we'd prefer not to get involved in another—"

"No, this isn't about Natalie," he assured them as he escorted Wes and Casey into the big, beam-ceilinged living room. "Wes, I've known you for quite a while, ever since I started doing the voice of Dickie Danger, Boy Detective for you people at SpareyArts Animation. I feel we're buddies. You too, Casey."

"And so?" asked Casey as she perched on the arm of a heavy wood and leather chair.

"Okay, you two have been very successful, now and again, at solving crimes," continued Thaxter. "Just recently all the media were talking about how you cleared up that Saint Valentine's Day robbery years after it had taken place. You're very good at solving mysteries and—"

"Wait now," cut in Casey. "You've got us mixed up with Nick and Nola. We only mess with mysteries that pop up in *our* lives, Burt."

"Nick and Nora," corrected Wes. He was standing, frowning, in front of the massive stone fireplace. "Casey's right about us, though. We're not detectives, and so we couldn't take you on as a client. If that's what you're leading up to."

Lowering herself down into the chair and crossing her long legs, Casey said, "Since we're here, Wes, we might as well let him tell us what's bothering him."

The voice-over actor glanced toward Wes. "Is that kosher with you?"

Shrugging one shoulder, Wes answered, "I suppose so. Just what is going on?"

Thaxter sighed. "I'm being blackmailed by a dead man," he told them.

Thaxter's den was nearly as large as the mansion's living room. He was pacing it now in that moderately bouncy way of his while attempting to explain things. He interrupted his narrative again to ask them, "You sure you don't want a drink? I don't drink myself, not since my second divorce, but I think Natalie has a bottle of cooking wine in the kitchen someplace. Unless she stuffed it in her backpack along with—"

"We don't drink," Wes told their friend. He and Casey were sharing a wide, black leather couch.

Casey recrossed her legs. "So cut to the cheese."

"The chase," corrected Wes. "Give us some details about this alleged dead man who's allegedly harassing you. Not that we could do much about it."

"C'mon, dear. Burt's an old chum, and we can at least lend a sympathetic ear to his plight."

The actor crossed the floor, which was strewn with an assortment of bright, multicolored Navajo rugs, to his massive redwood desk. "What I'm going to tell you now is confidential. You have to promise not to pass it on to anyone. Nobody, okay?"

"All well and good," said Casey. "Unless you're going to confess to being a serial killer, a terrorist, or a wanted criminal."

Smiling very faintly, Thaxter said, "Nothing quite that serious, Casey. What caused me to be screwed up at the moment is what some people might call plagiarism."

Wes inquired, "What would you call it?"

"Plagiarism, I guess." He went around behind the desk to seat himself, stiff and upright, in the chair. "Five years ago, as you know, Wes, I came to SpareyArts with a damn good idea for an animated cartoon series aimed at the juvenile and YA viewer."

"*Dickie Danger*, yeah."

"The angle was that Dickie was a *contemporary* kid as well as an amateur sleuth. He appeals to today's youth," Thaxter said. "Besides pitching the concept, I sold myself as the voice of Dickie Danger. At the risk of sounding egocentric—a charge Natalie often hurls at me, along with an occasional skillet—I am one of the best impersonators of teen voices in the voice business. And unlike a real teenager, the voice I use on *Dickie* is never going to change."

"We sort of," mentioned Casey, "already know this. Get to the spooky part, please, where the ghost comes in to harass you."

Thaxter placed both hands, palms down, atop his desk. "Well, the bottom line is that I didn't create *Dickie Danger, Boy Detective*."

"You stole it?"

"Not exactly, Casey." He leaned back in his chair, then forward again. "Six years ago at one of the local meetings of the Sons of the Desert—that's the Laurel and Hardy fan—"

"We know what it is."

"Anyway, I met a cartoonist-writer named Hank Batsford," continued Thaxter. "He was about twenty-five or -six, very talented. But he wasn't having much luck out here. He was getting by writing and drawing two comic books for Maximus/West. *Percy Pelican* and *Kitty Katz, Teen Detective*."

"Is that where you swiped *Dickie Danger*?"

"No, no. Hank had an idea for a cartoon show. There was a first draft of the proposal, along with some rough sketches. He hadn't been able to get any animation outfit to so much as look at it or to find an agent who'd handle him," explained the actor. "We figured, since I was already very successful at doing teen voices, that I should team with him to make the pitch."

"It's not plagiarism if you were partners," Wes pointed out.

"Hank Batsford," said Casey slowly and thoughtfully. "Sure, I used to know him . . ." She turned toward her husband. "Only casually, so don't fret. Tall, shy, built along the lines of an underweight basketball player. Pretty good cartoonist. We were on a panel once at the San Diego Comics-con." She frowned. "But he died four or five years ago."

"Five years ago," supplied Thaxter. "Or so I thought."

"What about the plagiarism?" asked Wes.

"After we'd worked together for about three months, polishing the *Dickie Danger* treatment, Hank heard that some guys with a lot of money were starting up a comic book company down in Mexico and—"

"I remember hearing about that bunch," cut in Casey. "They were doing basically soft-core porn. Went belly up in a year."

"Be that as it may, Casey, Hank was broke, and he couldn't wait around on the hope that we'd sell *Dickie*. He decided to drive down there in that ancient Toyota of his and apply for a—"

"The poor guy never got there," said Casey, uncrossing her legs and leaning back. "He had a younger sister, Sara, I think. I ran into her on the beach in Santa Monica back then, and she told me Hank had been killed in an auto accident somewhere south of the border."

"Actually, his car was found in a gully outside a Mexican village,"

said Thaxter. "Car had been stripped, and there was blood all over the front seat. The authorities figured he'd been jumped by bandits, killed, and buried God knows where."

Wes was visited by a recollection. "I was already working there when you sold the show. And you didn't put his name on the *Dickie Danger* proposal, did you?"

"Hank was dead, and I didn't even know he had a sister. If he did, he never mentioned her," explained the voice man. "Had SpareyArts known there was an estate and a bunch of heirs to deal with, they might've turned me down." He shook his head. "Way I saw it, Hank Batsford was dead and done for, but Dickie Danger sure as hell wasn't." He stretched up out of his chair. "I was right, too, and I've made a very comfortable living off of him ever since. Unlike my current wife, whose cookbook career is rapidly sinking into the toilet, I'm thriving."

Casey requested, "Explain how Hank's ghost is blackmailing you."

"This morning a postcard arrived," he answered, sitting down again. "Mailed in Pasadena, it was a vintage card, and on the front was one of those badly tinted photos of a movie star's home. Groucho Marx's actually." He paused. "On the backside of the postcard was a short message. I now know it by heart. 'Hi, Burt. I'm back and I want my share. Best, Hank.'"

Casey, carrying a large manila envelope she'd brought back from Burt Thaxter's, came purposefully into their late-night kitchen. "I really think we should shift through these clues, Wes, before turning in."

"Sift." He carried the cup of hot cocoa he'd just finished brewing over to the table and sat down. "What's that you're wearing?"

"My new pajama top." Seating herself across from him, she placed the envelope in front of her. "What do you think of it?"

"You look . . . Darn, I'm searching for the right descriptive word."

"Cute?"

"Close, yet not precise enough."

"Gorgeous?"

"Warmer, but . . ."

"Sweet and lovely?"

"Nope." Her husband then snapped his fingers. "I've got the word. Naked."

Casey wrinkled her nose. "It's perfectly all right to look naked in the privacy of your own kitchen. Not that I actually am." Undoing the envelope clasp, she lifted the flap. "If you're finished making fashion statements about my pj's, can we proceed?"

"You really sure, Case, that you want to play detective?"

She nodded. "I think it's kind of our duty to help Burt," Casey replied. "Besides, if Hank's come back from the dead, I'd like to see him again."

"Only casually, I presume." He took a sip of his cocoa. "Keep in mind that Burt swiped Hank's idea and made a stewpot of money with it. He's not exactly an innocent."

"So far he hasn't heard anything further from Hank. No specific demands about a cash settlement, no threats," said his wife. "Could be that Hank is truly dead and gone, and some con man is working a scam on him. We ought to find out."

"Speaking of con men, your dear old father wouldn't be behind this, would he?"

"Nope, he's hiding out in Guatemala, as you well know, Wes." From the envelope she extracted an unframed 8½ by 11-inch glossy photo and placed it atop the table.

The photograph was a black-and-white head shot of a lean man of about thirty-five. He was bald on top, but on the sides his crinkly hair reached well below his ears. The inscription read, "Nat, you understand me, babe. Hugs, Chip. XOXO."

"Since we found this picture on the driveway after she made her latest departure from Burt," Casey suggested, "we can assume it fell out of Natalie's sloppily packed knapsack." She tapped the photo near the thin man's sharp nose. "I know you feel we should've taken it inside and given it to Burt. But I don't think detectives can do that with what may be an important bit of evidence."

"We aren't detectives. We're only playing at it." Reaching across, he slid the glossy over to his side of the table.

"Besides, Burt may not know his current wife has a secret admirer," said Casey, reaching across the table to borrow his cup of cocoa. "Finding that out at this time might upset him even more."

"That's very thoughtful of you."

After sampling the cocoa, his wife said, "One of the first things we have to do is find out who this guy Chip is. I can probably track Natalie down tomorrow and just ask her. You know, woman to woman."

"Might work, though I doubt it. 'Hi, Nat, I don't know if this has any bearing on Burt's problem, but I'm dying to know the identity of this gawky guy you've been shacking up with.'"

"So what do we do?"

"Well, you might ask me who he is."

She straightened up in her chair. "You know the name of this man Natalie's having an affair with?"

"We don't know she's having an affair with anybody," he reminded his blond wife. "All we know is that this fellow is, or was, a friend of hers."

"So who is he?"

"Chip Dunbarton."

"Oh, c'mon, Wes. Chip Dunbarton's a pudgy, lovable teenager," the skeptical Casey said. "I used to watch that TV show of his, *Off the Old Block*, all the time."

Reaching across and retrieving his cocoa, he asked, "And when was that?"

"A few years ago, I guess."

"Closer to twenty." He tapped his finger on the thin actor's nose.

"You're certain that's who this is?"

"Sure. Dunbarton came around to SpareyArts last year looking for voice work. We didn't hire him."

"He used to be so cute and lovable." Casey sighed. "You'd think that if Natalie wanted to fool around, she'd pick a guy who was still cute and lovable at the moment." From the envelope, she took the Groucho Marx postcard plus a page of long ago *Dickie Danger* notes that Hank Batsford had written by hand.

Wes came around to her side of the table as she placed the message side of the card next to an earlier sample of his lettering. Resting a hand on his wife's slim shoulder, he said, "Same handwriting?"

"Seems to be, but . . ."

"Or a forgery?"

"Don't know. Hank always used a variation of basic comic book lettering. Not too hard to fake."

He picked up the vintage postcard, tilting it from left to right. "The average resident of Southern California doesn't have a sixty- or seventy-year-old postcard lying around."

"Hank was a great fan of the Marx Brothers. He took me to a revival of *Duck Soup* once, and was always talking about—"

"That sounds like a date."

"Not at all, and don't go acting like somebody who's inanely jealous."

"Insanely," he corrected, putting the card down. "See up in the right-hand corner, near the stamp. Something was erased, but you can make it out."

"HMS/1/13," she read. "What does that have to do with Burt's dilemma?"

"Maybe somebody bought this postcard recently," he explained. "There are three or four shops in Hollywood that handle movie memorabilia. The one just off Cherokee is called the Hollywood Memory Shop."

"HMS. And 1/13 is the date they acquired it."

"Probably."

"A Groucho Marx item must be expensive. Why not just buy a new postcard at the post office?"

He shrugged. "Maybe to look more like Hank." He drank some more of his cocoa. "In addition to that minimalist pajama top, Case, are you wearing a new perfume?"

"No. Same old stuff."

He sniffed the air, then picked up the page of *Dickie Danger* notes. "Somebody who handled this page was recently wearing perfume."

She leaned over to sniff. "A scent using sandalwood," she decided. "Same perfume. Natalie was wearing tonight. Didn't you notice?"

"Not in the brief moment we encountered her on the stairs, no."

"Burt told us nobody had seen any of those pages except him. He kept them in a tucked away filing cabinet in his office at home."

"Possibly Natalie took a look," Wes suggested. "Possibly she made some photocopies and shared them with Chip the middle-aged juvenile."

"To what purpose?"

"To throw a scare into Burt."

"Might be, but I think there's something else behind it," Casey said. "Hank is due a lot of money from his share of *Dickie Danger*. I bet either he or the person who's pretending to be him will contact Burt again soon and ask for a pile of cash."

"What can he do if Burt refuses?" Wes asked.

"Expose him as the one who stole the idea from a dead man."

"If all the people who stole ideas in Hollywood were exposed, there'd be—"

"Hey, we're just beginning our investigation. When we're further along, we'll know more."

"You want to continue with this?"

"I surely do."

"Okay, then we will."

It was one of those rare afternoons in Hollywood when the sky came fairly close to being a sharp, clear blue.

Wearing a moderately conservative skirt and jacket, Casey was walking briskly along Cherokee Boulevard. As she passed an ailing palm tree and turned on to the side street where the Hollywood Memory Shop was located, a plump woman was emerging from a small Armenian restaurant.

She made a surprised noise. "Why, I know you."

"Probably not, ma'am." Casey halted.

"Yes, you're on one of the sitcoms," said the woman, scrutinizing her as she moved near. "It's not that new comedy about suburban nymphomaniacs, is it? No, wait, you play the alcoholic autopsy surgeon on *Blood & Guts: Los Angeles*, don't you?"

Casey shook her head. "Afraid not. Although I do a television commercial once in a while still, and you maybe saw me on one of them. Or you could've noticed my picture on the inside cover of an issue of *Bertha the Biker*."

"What in Heaven's name is *Bertha the Biker*?"

"It's an independent comic book I write and draw. Comes out every now and then."

"Well, I'm out here to see movie and TV actors. Nice meeting you, but I better be getting on my way."

"You're bound to run into somebody who's momentarily famous before the day is out," Casey assured her and resumed her journey.

The Hollywood Memory Shop was in mid block, next to a store that specialized in souvenir T-shirts and caps. It was narrow, with an old-fashioned wooden door.

A bell above the door jingled when Casey entered the shop.

There were long rows of bins along three of the walls and rows of more bins making three narrow aisles on the worn hardwood flooring. The place smelled strongly of dust, aging paper, and hamburgers past.

A thin man, bald on top, emerged from the back room. "Can I help you, miss?" he inquired. "No visit to Hollywood is complete without picking up a bit of memorabilia or . . . Excuse me for a minute."

Hurrying down another aisle, he made his way to the front door. After locking it, he pulled down the old-fashioned shade.

Though Casey had long since recognized him as Chip Dunbarton, she decided to go on pretending to be a customer. "A friend of mine is a great fan of the Marx Brothers," she explained, watching Dunbarton coming now down the aisle she was standing in. "He likes the whole darn bunch of them. Groucho, Harpo, Chico, Zippo, and—"

"Zeppo," the thin actor corrected. "And you must be Casey McLeod Goodhill."

"Gee, you're the second person in the past ten minutes who mistook me for someone else. A woman out on the street thought I was—"

"According to Nat, you and your stupid husband were nosing around at her place last night," the erstwhile teenage star said. "And that asshole husband of hers must have shown you the postcard." He nodded to himself, causing his long side hair to

sway. "Sure, and you think of yourself as better than all the casts of all the CSI shows put together. Somehow you traced the card to this shop where I work and now—"

"Not at all, Chip," Casey assured the angry actor. "Burt did show us the card. I thought I'd like to get something similar for this dear old friend of mine, Bernie Zuber, who has a birthday coming up. This is the third shop in the area I've tried so far, and I'm sure hoping—"

"Yeah, that's another thing Natalie told me about you," Dunbarton remembered. "You're a world-class bullshit artist."

"I can't imagine why she'd—"

She never completed the sentence.

Dunbarton had suddenly lunged forward to punch her in the jaw, twice.

Casey passed out, fell to the worn floor, and ended the interview.

Meanwhile, little suspecting what fate held in store for him, Wes was seated at his drawing board in his SpareyArts office. The early afternoon outside was commencing to cloud up.

He held a soft-lead pencil in his right hand and his cell phone in the left. "It's nothing like that," he was saying to Mike Filchock, his scriptwriter friend. "But I can't give you too many details. Casey and I are nosing around in somebody else's mystery this time, so—"

"Can you guarantee me, old buddy," spoke Filchock, "that nobody involved in this caper is now or ever has been a boyfriend of your dear wife?"

"Look, Mike, I know you're not overly fond of Casey, and you have this cockeyed notion that she's continually getting us in trouble," he told him. "Even if that were true, she's changed even more since we've been married."

"Is this the place where the harp music comes in on the soundtrack?"

"The point I'm getting to is that this current business has almost nothing to do with her."

"Almost?"

"Well, she did know—casually—one of the parties involved," he admitted. "Years ago."

"Usually, when Casey drags you into a maelstrom of chicanery, intrigue, and serious danger, it has to do with some guy out of her past," reminded the writer. "And you've shared most all of the loathsome details with me. In fact, I might remind you, I've lent a hand on more than—"

"Other people are involved," Wes said, clearing his throat.

"We've just officially changed the subject. How's the script for your new series coming?"

Filchuck produced an unhappy sigh on his end of the conversation. "NBC seems to be having second thoughts, although there are those who swear that NBC isn't even capable of first thoughts," he said, a forlorn note entering his voice. "Apparently, some of the execs over there think my show's tasteless."

"And?"

"My agents can't convince them that *Precocious Pete the Horny Toddler* is what the networks need to stave off the growing competition from cable," continued Filchuck. "Christ, the damn show's got kid appeal, it's got sex, it's got heartwarming family life, *plus* that kind of broad obvious humor that's so popular with the audience group that all the advertisers, unless they make diapers for old coots, are lusting after."

"It sure sounded like a potential hit, Mike, the last time you told me about it."

"I had six flatulence jokes in the first three and a half minutes, and the scene where Precocious Pete jumps out of his crib and chases his statuesque Swedish nanny into the bedroom is going to play so damn funny to a studio audience that it won't even need a laugh track to sweeten it."

"I'm tempted to laugh just hearing the—"

A very forceful knock had started on the door of his office.

Before Wes reached the door, it came swinging open.

Burt Thaxter, in what for him was an unkempt state, hurried into the room. Clutched in his hand was a manila envelope. "I've heard from them," he announced, brandishing the envelope. "From the photocopies of Hank's notes that were sent along, I'm damn sure that whoever's behind this—Hank or somebody else—has certainly got the goods on me."

Into his phone Wes said, "Mike, I'll have to call you back." He set the phone on the taboret next to his board. "How much do they want, Burt?"

"Five hundred thousand dollars," the voice man replied, angrily shaking the envelope.

"Could you afford that?"

"Sure, but I'm hoping you and Casey can come up with an alternative way for me to get hold of all that incriminating—"

"Show me exactly what you were sent," he requested.

A light rain was drifting down through the gray afternoon. Casey could see it from the one window, barred, of the room she was locked up in.

She had awakened a half hour ago and found herself up here in a second-story bedroom of the hillside house. Rubbing at her sore jaw, she left the venerable rocker that was the only chair in the sparsely furnished room. "Looks like Chip must be the mastermind behind this nitwit plan," she said to herself. "Although it's kind of a stretch to think of him as a mastermind."

After pacing the room and once again finding no way to break out, she returned to the rocking chair. "Obviously, he's got a partner, somebody who has more than a peanut for a brain," she reflected. "It's got to be Natalie who's in cahoots with him."

The sound of her door being unlocked caused Casey to halt where she was in the middle of the threadbare carpet. "I shouldn't have dropped out of that karate class last summer. This would be a perfect place to use it on somebody."

"How's your jaw?" inquired Natalie.

"As well as can be expected," Casey replied. "You and your lover give me a big pain elsewhere."

Natalie, wearing Levi's and a man's blue shirt, shut the door behind her. "Obviously, dear, I had no idea Chip was going to sock you. Basically, he knows that I don't condone violence."

"Then maybe you ought to send the guy back to obedience school." She pointed a forefinger at her captor. "Now, without further crap, tell me why you people have abducted me."

"First things first." Natalie extracted a small red notebook from the hip pocket of her jeans. "Do you have any food allergies? Are there any medications that you have to take regularly? Any medical problems we ought to be aware of so—"

"Wait, I'm sure as heck not going to fill out a questionnaire for you."

"It's for your own good, Casey," Thaxter's vanishing wife assured her. "You'll be staying with us for the next few days, and we both want your stay to be as pleasant as possible. As you know, I'm a blue ribbon chef, and I'll be preparing your—"

"You can drop a menu off later, Natalie. Right now, please, explain to me why I was kidnapped and brought here. Wherever *here* is."

"Oh, this is Chip's cottage in Beverly Glen. He could do with a lot more furniture, but basically it's—"

"No, I want to know why."

"You have to keep in mind that Chip, because of all he's suffered at the hands of Hollywood, has a short fuse," Natalie said. "When you showed up at the memorabilia shop asking about a Groucho Marx postcard . . . Well, the poor guy panicked."

Casey, rubbing her jaw again, asked, "You and this middle-aged juvenile cooked up this goofy scam?"

"I provided, as you might imagine, Casey, most of the thinking and planning," the cookbook author said. "About three or four months ago, we—Burt and I—agreed that our marriage was heading for trouble and decided to see a marriage counselor."

"I remember Burt's telling us about that. Didn't help, apparently."

"One of the topics we discussed at our second session was guilt," Natalie continued. "Burt admitted that he'd been feeling guilty for years because he stole the idea for *Dickie Danger, Boy Detective* from Hank Batsford."

"So you decided you could make use of his guilt."

"I was certain I could get alimony if I just divorced him," Natalie said. "But, hell, that meant all kinds of legal rigmarole, and a long wait before I saw a penny. Threatening Burt with exposure was obviously a quicker way to my goal."

"Why are you so anxious about money? I thought your cookbooks were bestsellers."

"Only the first one, *Creative Meatballs*, even earned back its advance," she said. "My latest, *The Gourmet's Guide to Lettuce*, shipped less than a thousand copies."

"Burt must've told you quite a bit about Hank and the show."

"He did, but only once. That was on the way back from the counselor's. He's not bright in some ways, Casey, and he kept the file folder full of all the material Hank provided him and copies of all the memos he'd written to him in an unlocked drawer of his filing cabinet. Not smart."

"He has an unfortunate tendency to trust his wives."

"One afternoon while Burt was doing voice tracks at SpareyArts, I slipped into his home office, extracted a lot of the *Dickie Danger* material, made photocopies, and put the stuff back. Used the machine he has right next to his desk." She smiled. "What I had, I figured, was worth between two hundred and fifty thousand and five hundred thousand dollars to him. He may feel guilty about stealing Hank's ideas, but he sure doesn't want all that to hit the fan."

"That's-what all this is about, huh? To get money out of your husband."

"A perfectly good motive," Natalie said. "Our problem was that we couldn't directly approach my husband."

"So you brought Hank back to life."

"Exactly, Casey. I did research on Hank Batsford and confirmed what Burt had said. The poor guy was believed dead, but nobody had ever found his body." She smiled again. "He's only got one relative—lady named Sara Batsford Quinn who lives in Glendale. She even has a Web site devoted to his memory."

"Obviously she doesn't know anything about his involvement with *Dickie Danger*."

"No, but she sure posted a lot of information about Hank and his life," said Natalie. "Plus more samples of his handwriting and lettering styles."

"You forged the postcard?"

"Sure, that wasn't a problem. You seem to have forgotten that I minored in art at USC."

"What's your next move?"

"Already been taken. We sent Burt a letter explaining how much it'll cost him to hush us up—to hush Hank up, that is. We included some samples of the stuff I swiped. He'll, of course, think that Hank had kept his own copies somewhere and retrieved them now," she explained. "Obviously, we have to keep you quiet here, Casey, until we collect our dough and depart."

Casey stood up. "How much do you weigh?"

Burt's unfaithful wife frowned, puzzled. "What's that got to do with—"

"I figure about ninety-five to a hundred, since you're on the skinny side and only about five foot one," said Casey. "Myself, being taller and better nourished, weigh in at one twenty-five."

"Your point isn't getting across to—"

"And it doesn't look as though you have a gun on your person."

"I'm a blackmailer maybe, but that sort of work doesn't require a gun."

"Even though I didn't complete that karate course, I think I can toss you on your fanny and get out of here," she announced, and moved toward the other woman.

"Damned shame the Mercedes is in the shop," complained Burt Thaxter as he guided his last year's Saab up above Sunset into Beverly Glen. "This Saab really needs a tune-up."

The afternoon rain had grown heavier as they climbed higher into the hills.

"You do have a permit to carry a pistol?" inquired Wes from the passenger seat.

"I'm not some gun-nut vigilante. Of course I do."

Wes said, "I agree with you that Natalie is probably with Chip Dunbarton. Tell me, though, how come you know that?"

"I haven't," the voice man said, "been entirely honest with you and Casey."

"Oh, so?"

"I've employed other private eyes to—"

"We're *not* private eyes."

"What I'm getting at, Wes, is that around two months ago I hired an outfit with very impressive offices just off Rodeo Drive. The décor was—"

"Hired them for what?"

"To follow Nat, especially when she tried one of her great escapes." He turned onto a narrow side street. "Whether she was gone for a few hours or a few days, it was always that aging juvenile's place up here in Beverly Glen that she spent her time at."

"Why didn't you use these same detectives for this latest mess?"

"Now don't be offended, Wes," Burt said, adjusting his voice so that it conveyed contriteness. "But frankly, this outfit charges too much. If you're a celebrity like me, they think they can—"

"So you asked us to help out because we work cheap?"

"Hell, you work for nothing. Can't beat that price." The actor turned the car onto an even narrower lane.

"All very flattering. A real agency can have a slogan like 'We never sleep.' Case and I can advertise, 'We never charge.'"

"You've done pretty well thus far. I'm tempted to give you some kind of honorarium," Thaxter said. "You both have been a great help. You deduced that the stuff sent to me by the blackmailer had traces of Natalie's perfume all over it. My own sense of smell isn't all that—"

"She's definitely behind all this. That sandalwood scent made it even clearer."

Thaxter slowed the Saab. "We'll be confronting the pair of them soon. The cottage is just around the next turn," he said. "I'll drive on by and park under that stand of pepper trees up yonder. Then we can sneak back and surprise—"

"The front door is hanging open," Wes noticed as they passed.

"Oh, that's always a bad sign." The actor slowed the car. "Whenever Dickie Danger spies an open door on a house, he's pretty darn sure that something criminal has happened within. I remember in *The Case of the Ghost Mansion*, for instance, where he found the body of old Mrs. Phelps sprawled on the—"

"Stop the car right here, Burt. We'll go look inside."

"Good, yes." Hitting the brake, he parked the car at the curb.

They moved cautiously through the rainy afternoon and up the flagstone path to Dunbarton's open front door. "Dickie Danger almost always finds a body in situations like this," Thaxter said quietly.

"If we find one this time, we're going to call the cops."

"But perhaps, as often happens to Dickie, the killer's cut the phone lines?"

"Then it's a good thing I have my cell phone in my coat pocket." Less than ten seconds later, his cell phone chimed.

"Keep that damn thing quiet," urged Thaxter. "It's difficult to sneak up on somebody if you're ringing chimes."

"Yes?" Wes said into his phone.

"Can you come over here right away, dear?" asked his wife.

"Where . . . our place?"

"No, actually I happen to be on Ellison Lane in Beverly Glen."

"What a happy coincidence, my love, so am I."

The door opened wider and Casey, borrowed cell phone in hand, looked out into the gray day. "However did you find me?"

"Clever detective work," Wes said. "I sensed you were in—"

"Actually, Casey," put in Thaxter, "we had absolutely no idea you were here. Wes had a hunch that Natalie was behind the plot to extort money from me, and I guessed she might be with her lover. Is she?"

"Both of them are here, yes. Natalie is in an upstairs bedroom, tied up with some bedsheets I ripped up," she explained. "I used some simple karate on her and decked her. Looks like I'm having the last laugh, Wes, since you told me I was dippy for ever studying marital—"

"Martial," he corrected. "Where's Chip?"

"Flat on his backside in the parlor." She pointed over her slim shoulder with her thumb. "He tried to grab me as I was sneaking out the front door here."

"You used karate on him too?"

Casey shook her head. "No, him I hit on the skull with a brass lamp I grabbed up off the mail table."

Her husband crossed the threshold. "Looks very much like Natalie and Chip are the ones who posed as Hank Batsford."

"No doubt about that," said Casey, moving along the hallway. "Natalie admitted all that before I knocked her cold."

Wes stepped into the parlor to look at Chip Dunbarton. The thin actor was sprawled on the imitation Persian carpet. "You're quite formidable." He put an appreciative arm around Casey's waist.

"That's because I was really and truly ticked off," she told him. "He socked me in the memory shop."

"That's a painful place to be socked." He glanced around. "Where'd Burt get to?"

"He went upstairs to look for Natalie."

"He can't be thinking of getting back together with her?"

"Doesn't matter," said Casey. "I intend to charge both Natalie and Chip with kidnapping."



It was a week and a half later that Burt Thaxter dropped in at Wes's office at SpareyArts. He had a copy of his latest *Dickie Danger, Boy Detective* in his hand. "I hate to screw up your working day, Wes," said the voice man. "But since I had to come in today to record two *Dickie* sound tracks, I thought I'd impose on you and ask if you can help on—"

"Are you and Natalie still back together?" He pushed back from his drawing board, looked up at his actor friend.

"Yes, we are. I'm aware that extortion and adultery—well, either one is sufficient reason for divorce. Yet Natalie has promised me that she will be faithful from here on out."

"And what has Chip promised?" Wes asked, leaving his chair.

"He has, as I understand, embarked for Europe, where he hopes to get employment in some quickie movies financed by people who are looking for new ways to launder their money," he said. "And, Wes, I want to thank you both for not having either of them arrested for kidnapping Casey."

"Since you immediately took her back, it would've made for an even more difficult marriage. Casey couldn't charge just one of them, so that left Chip out as well," Wes said. "She also got to thinking that she didn't want to suffer through all the rigmarole of going to the police and then to court."

"I appreciate that, as does Natalie," the actor said. "She's not mad at Casey for using karate on her and trussing her up like a—"

"Since the recording session is commencing in fifteen minutes, you'd better—"

"I have another problem, Wes, and I was wondering if you and—"

"Does this have to do with Hank's sister, Sara Batsford Quinn?"

Burt did a frowning take. "It does, sure, but how in the—"

"You can thank Casey for that."

"She's in contact with that woman? Is she a partner in this latest attempt to extort money from me?"

"Nope, not at all. But Case did go out to Glendale a few days ago to turn over all that material that Natalie had copied from your files, Burt."

"But she returned all those photocopies to me the next day."

"After she'd made photocopies of the photocopies."

"You mean Casey gave that material to his sister? The woman told me she found the stuff in an old trunk she'd just gotten out of storage."

Nodding, Wes said, "Casey coached her. Though reformed, my wife is still very good at constructing lies and falsehoods."

"But why? Is it because the honorarium I sent you was too

small? I mean, five hundred dollars is still a handsome sum."

"Casey has a strong sense of justice. She believes that Hank's next of kin ought to have a share of the profits you've been making off of your boy detective. Especially now that there's talk of a full-length theatrical *Dickie Danger, Boy Detective* movie."

"How the hell did she find that out?"

"I told her." Wes pointed at the door. "Go record, Burt. Casey tells me that Mrs. Quinn is a pleasant woman, and you're likely to work out an amicable settlement with her."

Scowling, Thaxter walked to the door, slapping the rolled up script against his right leg. "I have to admit I'm very disappointed in you two," he said over his shoulder. "Fact is, I'm not going to recommend you to any of my friends."

"I appreciate that," said Wes. 🐦

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

ZKS JMX P KRI ZCU KATIXSI VUATYI, RTI KS JUZ SBSXF
VSTTF UH MZ, RTI YKS AZZSXPF IMYRVVSRXSI. RTI
YLUZPRTI FRXI LUAPIT'Z HMTI KSX.

—PUXI IATYRTF

CIPHER:

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 125

FIRST BLOOD

EDWARD D. HOCH

If the cactus forest of Arizona had impressed Annie Sears on her drive from El Paso to San Diego, she was almost as impressed with the line of giant wind turbines atop a hill where cattle grazed. Somehow they seemed to symbolize this new megacity, already the seventh largest in the country and almost twice the size of San Francisco.

"You know, we have a much larger department than El Paso," Chief Williams told her the first day she reported for duty.

"Of course." She'd dressed conservatively for their first meeting, deciding on a white blouse and gray cotton suit for this warm June morning. Her long hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail, and she'd kept her makeup to a bare minimum.

"We do have some of the same problems, though, with illegal border crossings that add to the crime statistics. I need all the help I can get."

She shifted uneasily in her chair, hoping they hadn't hired her away from the El Paso department merely to chase illegals across the desert. "I've been wanting a chance on a big-city force," she told him. "I hope I've found it here."

"Your record speaks very well for you, Ms. Sears." He pressed a button on his desk. "I'm going to assign you to work with Sergeant Reynolds in Homicide. I think you'll find him to be a good teacher."

Annie wasn't really looking for a teacher, just a partner who knew his way around the city until she got her bearings. But the door opened and there was Sergeant Reynolds extending his hand. "Call me Josh," he suggested with a wry smile. He was a good decade older than her, probably around forty, with dark hair and a strong jaw line. "Good to have you aboard, Annie."

He showed her around the squad room and took her down to the forensic lab. Along the way, she met over a dozen people whose names became a blur in her memory. She guessed she'd sort them all out eventually. Reynolds assigned her an empty desk just outside his own cubicle and handed her the badge and

holstered pistol he'd picked up from the captain.

"You're one of us now," he said. "You'll want to put in some time on the range with the weapon, just to familiarize yourself with it. You should carry it even when you're off duty." Over coffee he explained the workings of the department and the geography of the city. "City Hall, the courthouses, and the Metro Correction Center are all here within an area of a few blocks. Unfortunately, police headquarters is a dozen blocks to the east."

He showed her the map on one wall. "This is all San Diego?" she asked.

He laughed. "It's a big city. Some people call it the birthplace of California. Most of our work will be downtown." As if on cue, the phone on his desk rang. He answered it with a brusque "Reynolds, Homicide." When he hung up, he reached in a drawer for his service automatic. "Your first case, sooner than I expected."

"What is it?"

"Robbery and shooting at the Essex Jewelers in Emerald Plaza. Let's go."

The time was 11:25.

Emerald Plaza, Reynolds explained as they drove west on Broadway, was barely ten years old. It consisted of three hexagonal towers topped with emerald neon rings, with a hundred-foot-high atrium featuring a huge chandelier made of emerald green panels. Essex Jewelers had offices high up in one of the towers. "They're not looking for walk-in business. They buy gold and diamonds from estates and sell it to wealthy buyers in Beverly Hills or Miami Beach."

He pulled up behind an ambulance and police car already on the scene. "The chandelier is impressive," Annie admitted as they hurried across the atrium to a waiting elevator.

"Pin your badge on," he told her. "These guys won't know you."

"Right."

They took the elevator to the twentieth floor, where a uniformed patrolman was awaiting them. "What's the story, Rodriguez?"

"Attempted robbery. One man dead. In here."

They followed him through an open door into a small reception area. There was no desk for a receptionist, only a leather sofa with two matching chairs. On the wall was a sign calling attention to an intercom speaker. Another officer was inside, directing them to a small, windowless office with a thick wooden door. Two empty chairs faced a desk where a man was slumped facedown in a welter of blood.

A grayhaired man in a conservative pinstriped suit and blue tie followed them in from an adjoining office. "I'm Matthew Kirk, president of Essex Jewelers. The dead man is our vice president, Perry Valencia. I don't know what happened."

Sergeant Reynolds introduced himself and Annie. "Suppose you tell us what you do know, Mr. Kirk."

The forensic people were arriving on the scene, so they moved into Matthew Kirk's somewhat larger office. This one had a window, with a magnificent view of downtown San Diego.

"I was here in my office, going over some figures. None of us heard a thing."

"Who else was here at the time?" Annie asked, making notes. He seemed remarkably calm for someone who'd just had an employee killed in his office.

"There are usually five of us: myself, Perry, Jenny Presburg, Chris Fox, and Ashley Cooper. Ashley is out ill today. For business reasons, our offices are soundproofed, with thick doors." He motioned toward a corner of the ceiling where Annie had already observed the tiny eye of a security camera. "We have cameras in every room, and each of us has a small monitor to observe the entrance. You understand, we don't sell jewelry here. Our business is buying gold, silver, diamonds, and other precious stones, mainly from estates. These are resold to dealers around the country."

"We're more interested right now in the killing of Perry Valencia," Reynolds told him, trying to mask his impatience. "If you didn't hear the shot, you must have at least seen who was in the room with him."

"I didn't, but the monitors for the rooms are in Chris's office. He's our treasurer. He's the one who spread the alarm."

"I guess we'd better talk to him," Reynolds decided.

Kirk called him in from the next office. He was a blond man in his thirties, with frown lines already deeply etched around his eyes. A small goatee seemed out of place on his face. "Tell them what you saw," Matthew Kirk said.

Chris Fox was a bundle of nerves, taking a seat and then immediately standing up. "Have you caught him yet?" he wanted to know.

"Just tell us what you saw."

"Well, first I saw someone entering the office on the door monitor. We need magnetic key cards to get to the inner offices. Outside of us, the only other cardholder is Miguel, on the cleaning crew. He personally comes in each morning and empties our trash. I only caught a glimpse, but I knew it was him."

"Could anyone have come in with him?" Annie asked.

"I don't think so, but I wouldn't swear to it. Usually when

someone enters the waiting room, whoever's free greets them on the speaker, asks their business, and then comes out to escort them inside. I don't do appraisals, which is why the monitors are in my office away from visitors." He sat down again. "God, this is awful! I can't believe it happened."

"What did you see?"

"I'm not often watching the screens. They're out of my line of vision. But I suddenly became aware that Perry was slumped over his desk. I never heard the gunshot, but that's not surprising, with the soundproofing and the thick doors."

"Don't you have sound on the security cameras?" Annie asked.

"It's against the law unless there's a sign advising people they're being recorded."

"Had Miguel left by this time?"

"I don't know. I was more concerned about Perry. I called to the others, and we ran in."

"Knowing a killer with a gun was somewhere in the office?"

"We didn't know it then. We'd didn't even realize he'd been shot until we saw all the blood and looked at the tape."

"That's what we'd all better do right now," Reynolds decided.

"Where's this woman, Jenny Presburg?"

"She was sick at the sight of it. She's still in the restroom."

He turned to Annie. "See if she's all right, Sears."

The single restroom was next to the mailroom with its fax and copy machines: Annie knocked and tried the door. It was locked, but a voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Detective Sears, Ms. Presburg. Are you all right?"

She flushed the toilet, unlocked the door, and showed Annie an ashen face. "I'm sorry. It's not every day I see a friend with his brains splattered—" She turned back to the toilet, and Annie went in to offer whatever help she could. But the worst seemed to be over. The young woman flushed the toilet one more time and straightened up, washing her hands and face before retrieving her purse and brushing off the front of her blouse and pants. "I'm all right now," she told Annie. "Let's go into my office."

Her office was much like the one the dead man occupied, fairly small and windowless, with a phone, computer, and a monitor to view the office entrance. On a shelf next to the desk were a high-powered microscope and a flat-topped scale, which she explained was for accurate weighing of gold and silver items. "You can usually tell if a piece of jewelry is pure gold simply by weighing it," she explained. "The microscope is for close examination of diamonds and other precious stones."

"All the offices have these?" Annie asked.

"Just mine, Perry's, and Ashley's. We do the appraisals. Of course we check with Mr. Kirk on items of special value."

"What about Chris Fox?"

"He writes the checks. He's our treasurer. We have a policy of immediate payment when we make a purchase. Usually it's by check, but we keep a supply of cash on hand, too, for clients who prefer it."

"So this was probably an attempted robbery."

"It must have been."

"Was Valencia here when you arrived this morning?"

She shook her head. "I was the first one in, around eight thirty. I had to finish up some work from yesterday. The others drifted in around nine, except for Ashley. She phoned to say she was sick."

Sergeant Reynolds entered just then. "The security camera caught it all," he told us. "We have the murder on tape. Want a look?"

While the medical examiner completed his work and preparations were made to remove the body, they went into Chris Fox's office, where a bank of television monitors showed views of each office and the waiting room. Matthew Kirk had taken Fox's seat behind the desk. It was he who spoke first.

"Go on. Let's see it."

Chris Fox had rewound the tape, and he pressed the play button. The camera was peering over the shoulder of a slender man with a receding hairline whom Kirk identified as the victim, Perry Valencia. He was on the phone, and the time at the top of the photo showed 10:00, when the office opened for business. Then he was seen reading from a sheet of stiff red paper. "That's a weekly report we receive on the price of gold, silver, and various precious gems," Matthew Kirk explained. "It's invaluable in this business."

Fox fastforwarded the tape, then went back to play. "Here it is. Here's something just before eleven. See the door opening just a crack, and somebody says something." On the tape, Valencia glanced up and waved them away.

Annie's eyes were glued to the monitor. "They have these cameras running all day?"

"They can have me shut them off, but no one ever does. I keep the tapes for a week and then record over them."

Annie kept watching the monitor. She saw the heavy wooden door open and a figure in a long black coat and gloves enter. His or her head was completely covered by a rubber Batman mask. Valencia looked up, startled. The Batman figure never spoke but simply raised a long-barreled target pistol and fired two quick

silent shots. The screen flared for an instant, then cleared to show the masked figure exiting the office, pausing only long enough to drop the weapon. The time was 11:09.

"The gun!" she exclaimed, pointing to the screen. "He dropped it!"

Sergeant Reynolds nodded, "We found it in the wastebasket next to the desk. He didn't want to be caught with it on his person."

"That seems like a gang killing," Annie ventured. "An execution. Did it have a silencer? We couldn't hear the shots."

"The cameras don't record sound," Chris Fox verified.

Annie turned toward Matthew Kirk. "Have you had any dealings with organized crime?"

"Certainly not!"

"Drugs? Illegal immigration?"

"I run a respectable business here!"

"I'm sure you do," Reynolds acknowledged, taking over Annie's line of questioning. "But that doesn't mean your employees might not be into something shady. What about Valencia? Does he have a wife, family?"

Jenny Presburg answered. "He's unmarried. I always thought he might be gay."

"Why's that?"

She shrugged. "Just a feeling I had."

The sergeant turned back to Chris Fox. "What about the rest of the tapes? What do they show?"

"Not much. We had no clients in yet this morning."

"You mean you four were the only ones in the office?"

"Miguel came in to empty the trash, like he does every morning."

"Let's take a look."

"I usually don't turn the security cameras on till we open at ten o'clock, but we have him when he came back after that." The tape of the reception area showed a shapeless person in green work clothes using a key card to open the inner office door. The timer at the top of the screen showed it to be 10:56. "Is that Miguel?" Reynolds asked.

"It sure looks like him," Jenny said.

"Why doesn't he come at night?"

"We don't allow anyone in here when the office is closed," Kirk explained. "His key card only works during regular office hours. The offices are cleaned between nine and ten each morning, before we start receiving clients."

"Are you certain Miguel came in earlier?"

Chris Fox nodded. "He emptied my wastebasket." Kirk and Jenny Presburg agreed. He'd been in all their offices shortly after

nine. "We don't allow the cleaning people in unless one of us is in the office." He motioned toward a closet door. "We have a vault in there that often contains jewelry and large sums of money. Even with all the security devices we can't take any chances."

"What makes you think the killing was part of a robbery attempt?" Annie asked. "On that tape the killer never said a word about money or anything else."

Matthew Kirk was growing impatient. "Of course it was robbery! What else could it be? If some enemy wanted to kill him they'd have done it at his home or on the street, not in this office with security cameras everywhere."

"But the security cameras prove one thing," Reynolds reminded him. "You three were in the office when he was shot. No one else was here. Therefore, one of you must have killed him."

"What about Miguel?" Chris said. "He came in at 10:56."

Reynolds turned to Annie. "Find this Miguel and bring him up here if he knows anything."

She took the elevator to the lobby, now cluttered with news people and TV cameras. The word had traveled fast. One young man about her age headed for her at once. "Pardon me, Detective—" She realized he'd spotted her badge. "Pardon me, I'm Paul Goodhue from the *Union Tribune*. Can you tell me what's happening here?"

"An ongoing criminal investigation. We'll issue a statement in due course."

"We saw them take a body out—"

"Sorry, no comment."

She hurried over to the lobby reception desk. "Where can I find Miguel? He's on the cleaning crew."

"I'll page him," the woman said.

He came off the elevator a few minutes later, a short, somewhat overweight man in his forties. "You looking for me, lady? I'm Miguel Fernandez."

"Detective Annie Sears. I just want to ask you some questions."

He was immediately on the defensive. "I'm legal. I got my papers."

"It's not about that. There's been a killing at Essex Jewelers on the twentieth floor. You clean and empty their wastebaskets, don't you?"

"I know nothing about a killing!" he insisted.

"You entered their office around eleven this morning."

"No!" He shook his head violently. "I clean between nine and ten, always between nine and ten. I don't go there again."

"I saw the tape from the security camera. It looked like you."

"Not me!" he insisted, and Annie had to admit that she hadn't seen the man's face clearly on the black and white tape.

"Where were you around eleven o'clock?"

"On my lunch break. We start early."

"Where did you go for lunch?"

"We have a room in the sub-basement. My wife, she fixes a sandwich for me. And there's vending machines for us."

"Anyone see you there?"

"Sure, there were people around."

Annie opened her notebook. "I need their names, Miguel."

He shrugged. "I don't know names. I know I didn't kill anybody."

"You have a key card to open the Essex office door. Did you loan it to anyone?"

"No. I got it right here." He showed her the plastic card with the Emerald Plaza logo.

"All right, Miguel. We'll want to talk with you again later."

"I got nothing to hide."

She left him there and took the elevator back upstairs. Kirk, Fox, and Jenny Presburg were seated in the reception area with Rodriguez, the patrolman who'd been first on the scene. "What's up?" she asked him.

"The sergeant and two officers are searching the offices," he told her.

Reynolds came out and asked about Miguel. "He insists it wasn't him," she reported. "He was taking a lunch break then."

He nodded without comment. "We're searching this place top to bottom. We found that black coat the killer probably wore."

"It's Ashley's raincoat," Kirk explained. "She wore it one day months ago when it rained, then forgot about it. She decided to leave it here in the closet. The gloves were in the pocket."

"Ashley?"

"That would be Ashley Cooper," the sergeant told her. "The woman who's out sick today."

"It points to an inside job," Annie said. "Someone had to know the coat was here."

Chris Fox stirred in his chair. "Miguel would have seen it when he cleaned the office."

"What about the Batman mask?"

"That's what we're searching for," Reynolds explained. "Our on-screen killer had four items. He dropped the gun in the wastebasket. We found the coat and gloves in the closet. But the mask isn't here. We've searched every desk drawer, filing cabinet, and closet. The ceiling and walls are solid. The windows can't be opened. I'm going to request that you three submit to a body search. Annie,

please take Ms. Presburg into the bathroom and check her out."

Jenny shrugged. "I have nothing to hide."

"Bring your purse too," Annie told her. "I'll have to search that."

She had no Batman mask or anything else hidden beneath her blouse and pants. Her purse yielded only a handkerchief, lipstick, nail file, manicure scissors, wallet, and key chain. "All right," Annie said. "I guess you're clean."

"Nothing on the men," Reynolds told her when she returned to the treasurer's office while the others waited outside.

"She's clean too. Could we test their hands for nitrate, see if they fired a gun lately?"

He shook his head. "You're forgetting the killer wore gloves."

"Then where are we?"

"The Batman mask is missing. It's nowhere in this office and none of these three left the office. If I can play Sherlock for a moment—"

She smiled slightly. "Do you frequently?"

"—if the mask is gone, the killer had to remove it. Therefore, the killer is the only person we know left the office—Miguel Fernandez or someone posing as him."

"Maybe we think differently in El Paso, Sergeant. There's one place in this office that hasn't been searched, and that's where you'll find the missing mask."

"Where's that?" he asked with a frown.

"The vault."

In the best of all possible worlds, Annie Sears would have solved her first murder case with the San Diego force in a matter of two hours. The missing mask would have been in the vault, and Chris Fox would have confessed to the killing.

But there was nothing in the vault except currency, carefully wrapped diamonds, several pieces of gold jewelry, and a few contracts with buyers and sellers.

No mask.

"Go out and talk to this Ashley Cooper," Reynolds suggested, aware of her disappointment. "It was her raincoat. Find out if she's really sick. Meanwhile, I'll collect the videotapes from the security cameras and take them back to headquarters."

She didn't argue, feeling a bit foolish over her failed solution. She got the woman's address from Matthew Kirk and set off for an apartment on Grape Street, eight blocks away on the north side of downtown.

Ashley Cooper answered the door in a pink bathrobe, holding a tissue to her nose. "It's not a cold," she assured Annie. "Just a bad

asthma attack. My doctor can't see me till morning." She was an attractive blond woman, perhaps in her mid thirties, who was a bit shorter than Annie in her bare feet. "Come on in."

"I'm Detective Sears, the one who phoned you. Mr. Kirk told you what happened this morning?"

She nodded, curling up in an armchair across the room from Annie. "I couldn't believe it. That office has every sort of high-tech security device there is!"

"How well did you know Perry Valencia?"

"Well, only five of us work there, so naturally we're close. I had lunch with him a few times."

"Ever date him?"

"No. He didn't seem attracted to women. But he knew his job. He was probably the best appraiser in the place."

"Did he have any enemies?"

"I suppose everyone has enemies, but I didn't know anyone in the office who disliked him."

"What about the other woman, Jenny Presburg? Did he have lunch with her too?"

"Sometimes. There's a nice restaurant in our building, and occasionally all three of us would go there."

"But not Mr. Kirk or Chris Fox?"

She shook her head. "I think Mr. Kirk likes to go over the books with Chris when we're not around to interrupt. They sometimes lunched together later."

"Do you know Miguel Fernandez?"

"I don't think so." She paused a moment and then said, "Oh! Do you mean Miguel on the cleaning crew?"

"That's right."

"He was usually in our office early, cleaning up before any clients arrived. Mr. Kirk didn't like it done at night."

"Miss Cooper—"

"You can call me Ashley."

"Ashley, the security camera in Valencia's office recorded the killing. It appears that the killer was wearing a mask along with your raincoat and gloves from the office closet."

"My God! What does that mean?"

"It indicates the killer was someone in the office, or someone who has access to it. He or she knew the raincoat would be in there and could be used."

"None of us could have killed him. It's just not possible."

"How long had your raincoat been there?"

"Oh, since last winter sometime—March, I think. We don't get much rain, but there was a nasty morning in March when I wore

the coat. By afternoon it was sunny and warm so I left it in the office."

"Was Miguel ever in the office after ten o'clock?"

"Only if someone paged him. You know, if there was damage of some sort that needed to be cleaned up. That hardly ever happened."

"When do you think you'll be able to work?"

Ashley shrugged. "Depends what the doctor says. Maybe she can give me a different prescription. The office will probably be closed till after Perry's funeral anyway."

Annie left the apartment and walked back along Grape Street to her car. As she was unlocking the door, she heard her name. "Detective Sears, isn't it?"

She turned and recognized Paul Goodhue, the reporter from the *Union Tribune*. "That's right," she admitted with a smile. "You wouldn't have followed me here, would you?"

"Pure coincidence." He was a bit older than she'd thought at first, with fine lines beginning to form across his forehead and around his eyes. She noticed he wasn't wearing a wedding ring. "I came here to see Ashley Cooper, one of the Essex employees."

"I just saw her, as you no doubt know. She's a bit under the weather. I doubt if she'd welcome another visitor."

He glanced at his watch. "What time does your shift end? Could I buy you a drink?"

All she could do was laugh. "Is this the way it's done in San Diego? You buy the detective a drink to get an inside track on the story?"

"Only if they're as attractive as you."

"Sorry, Paul. You picked the wrong one."

"You're new to the city, aren't you? I could show you around, take you on a boat ride around the harbor, or a trip to the zoo."

She got into her car. "I have to get back now. I'll promise you a scoop if there is one. Nice talking to you." She drove away before he could say anything else.

Back at the squad room, Josh Reynolds told her to go home. "Your shift ends in fifteen minutes. You've done enough for your first day."

"I did nothing. We've got an unsolved murder on our hands."

"Relax, Annie. It's a rare case that gets closed the first day. If you're not ready to go home, fire off a few clips on the pistol range. Get the feel of your weapon."

She followed his advice and went down to the range. Her aim was as good as ever, and after three clips she became aware that

Sergeant Reynolds was standing off to one side watching her. "How'd I do?" she asked him.

"I guess you didn't need the practice," he told her with a smile. "Here, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

They sat at a picnic table in what served as a lounge adjoining the pistol range. "Do you know a reporter named Paul Goodhue?" she asked, taking a sip of coffee from the Styrofoam cup.

"Yeah. He been bothering you?"

"Not really. I think he asked me for a date."

Reynolds snorted. "Your first day. He doesn't waste any time."

"What's his story? Is he a good reporter?"

"He's helped us out a couple of times. He knows his way around the city."

"He offered to show me the zoo."

"I'll bet he did."

"What's next?" she asked, changing the subject.

"I'm bringing Matthew Kirk in for an interview in a half hour. I'll have the other two in the morning. And then probably Miss Cooper and that Miguel Fernandez after I read your reports on them. Your shift is over, but do you want to sit in on my interview with Kirk?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

He arrived promptly at five o'clock, accompanied by his lawyer, a stodgy man who might have been Kirk's brother but turned out to be his nephew. "There's no need for you to be present," Reynolds told him. "We just want a statement from Mr. Kirk about what happened this morning."

"Wait out here," Kirk told him. "I'll call you in if we need you."

Annie sat to one side, letting Reynolds do the questioning. "As you told us earlier, you were in your office at the time Perry Valencia was shot."

"That's correct. We don't have a great deal of walk-in business. Generally, someone phones for an appointment. Chris Fox handles our finances and writes the checks when necessary. Perry, Jenny, and Ashley did the actual appraising and purchased the items from our clients. Anything above ten thousand dollars has to be cleared with me."

"Were there any problems with Perry?"

Matthew Kirk hesitated. "Not—not really."

"What does that mean?"

"Last week Chris noticed something odd with a purchase he made. We receive regular fliers from your department regarding jewelry thefts, in case someone tries to sell us stolen goods. There was a diamond ring in one lot that seemed familiar to him. It had

been purchased by Perry the day before, and Chris asked him about it. He told me later that Perry seemed flustered by his question and said he'd look into it. He claimed to know the person who sold him the jewelry, though the name wasn't familiar to me."

"Do you suspect Valencia was acting as a fence for stolen goods?"

He shook his head. "It hadn't gotten that far yet, but I was a bit concerned."

"Was he a Mexican-American?"

"Well, yes. But I don't see what that has to do with it. He'd lived here over twenty years, since he was a child."

"I'm wondering if he might have been friendly with Miguel Fernandez, one of the crew that cleans your office. The security video indicates that Miguel or someone dressed like him entered your office shortly before the murder."

"You think Perry was involved with Miguel just because they're both Mexican-Americans? We've got a million and a quarter people in this city, and more than a quarter of them are Hispanic."

"I'm trying to touch all the bases, Mr. Kirk. It just seems odd that Miguel came up to the office at that time."

Annie felt she had to interrupt. "When I questioned him he denied he was there. It's possible someone impersonated him."

"He had a key card to unlock the inner door, Detective," Reynolds answered, and she knew he was displeased at her interruption. "If it wasn't Miguel, he had to obtain the key from Miguel."

She knew she should keep quiet then, but she had to speak. "There's one other possibility. Ashley Cooper must have a key card too."

"Ashley?" Kirk repeated with a frown. "She's home ill."

"I interviewed her this afternoon," Annie said. "She had an asthma attack, that's all. She wasn't in bed or anything."

Sergeant Reynolds sighed. "We have the tapes from your security cameras here. Suppose we look at Miguel again." He chose a tape from the pile on his desk and popped it into the tape player. After a moment's fast-forward they again came to the spot where the figure of a man in work clothes entered the waiting room and used his key card on the inner door.

"That's Miguel," Kirk insisted. "It's no one else."

"It looks like him," Annie had to agree. "But why did he lie to me about being there?"

"Perhaps because he killed Perry," Kirk said. "And that's how the Batman mask left the office."

They advanced the tape further and saw Miguel leaving at 11:01. He'd been in the office for exactly five minutes. "Let's see

the tape of the killing again," Annie suggested.

They watched it once more and froze it at the instant of the shooting. "Look at the time!" Annie said, rising from her chair. "It's 11:09, eight minutes after Miguel left the office. Why didn't we notice that before?"

Reynolds nodded. "Whether or not that was Miguel, he was gone before the killing. We're back to just three suspects."

Annie had another thought. "Look, you have tapes there showing each of the offices. Let's see who wasn't in their office at the time of the killing."

They played the tapes one at a time, with Matthew Kirk's first. In each case the camera was positioned to look over their shoulder, focusing on the visitor. Kirk seemed to be alone, but all they could see was his left elbow. It did move from time to time, and at 11:16 they saw Chris Fox burst into the office and both of them went out. The tape of Jenny showed her more clearly, opening her mail and taking a thick reference book from the shelf. She left the office at 11:17. Chris Fox was also moving around, though the angle of the camera in his office didn't show the bank of TV monitors. He muttered a soft curse and left the office quickly at 11:15.

"Nobody could have done it," Annie concluded.

Reynolds shut off the monitor and thanked Kirk for coming in. "What happens now?" the jeweler asked.

"We sleep on it. And in the morning we find out what Miguel was doing in your office and why he lied about being there."

Annie went along with Reynolds in the morning. Somehow, she felt responsible for Miguel since she'd interviewed him, and if he'd lied she wanted to know why. Arriving at the building, they were directed to eighteen, where they found him using an electric polisher on the floor by the elevators.

He smiled at Annie. "The lady with the questions."

"That's right. This is Sergeant Reynolds. He has questions too."

"Is there someplace we can talk?" Reynolds asked.

"I've got to finish polishing the floor."

"All right, just stop for a minute. I have only one question. Why did you go to the Essex office just before eleven yesterday morning?"

"I told the lady it wasn't me!"

"You've been positively identified on the security tape. You entered the office at 10:56 and left five minutes later."

Miguel shifted his gaze from Reynolds to Annie and back again. "I didn't kill him!" he insisted. "Someone left a message for me to check with Valencia about some problem in his office, but when I got up there everything was fine."

"You spoke to Valencia?"

"Sure. I poked my head in his office, and he said everything was fine there. Said he hadn't called, that it must be a mistake."

"Did you talk to the person that called?" Annie asked.

He shook his head. "It was a text message on my pager." He showed it to them. "It just said, 'See Perry V. at Essex.' But when I went up there, he said he hadn't paged me."

"Were those his exact words?"

Miguel thought a bit. "He said there was nothing for me. I figured he'd taken care of whatever there was, so I left."

"Did anyone else see you?"

"No. They all had their doors closed."

Josh Reynolds took over the questioning. "Did you at any time remove a Batman mask from that office?"

"No sir! And I didn't remove a thing when I went back yesterday."

When they were in the elevator, Reynolds asked, "Can we believe him?"

"We can about the mask. The security camera shows him leaving the office at 11:01, and the murder didn't happen till 11:09."

"There's something not quite right here," Reynolds decided. "I can almost sense it."

"Do you think they're all in it together?"

He gave a low snort. "I may feel like a master detective sometimes, but not Agatha Christie. If they were in it together they could have devised any number of methods better than this one. But I do think the key to it is what Kirk told us about Valencia buying a stolen diamond ring. If someone else there arranged for him to act as a fence, that would provide a motive for killing him before he talked and the whole operation went down the drain."

"Yeah." She was still thinking about his words when the elevator reached the lobby. "Look, Josh, I've got an idea about that Batman mask. I'm going to check out neighborhood stores that might have sold it."

"Good luck. It was probably left over from Halloween. It might mean the killer has children."

"I'm working on another angle. I'll see you back at the squad room."

There were no costume shops in the upper-class neighborhood, but she found a large toy store a few blocks away in Horton Plaza Shopping Center. Yes, they had several superhero costumes for sale, the sales clerk said. Wouldn't she prefer Wonder Woman?

"No, all I really need is one of these rubber Batman masks that covers the whole head."

She bought it and headed back to the squad room, wondering what her new boss would think of the idea.

The Essex office was still closed for business the following day, but Sergeant Reynolds had asked Kirk to assemble his staff for further questioning. Ashley Cooper was feeling better and agreed to come in too. They gathered in Kirk's office where there were seats for everyone. Reynolds and Annie had arrived with another detective in overalls carrying a toolbox. He went into the restroom and closed the door.

It was Reynolds who did most of the talking, and Annie could see he was enjoying it, facing the suspects like Charlie Chan at the end of one of those old movies. "We've developed a theory that the shooting of Perry Valencia was connected with an earlier incident in which a stolen ring was discovered in a group of items he'd supposedly purchased from an estate. If someone in this office supplied it to him, that person might have killed him to silence him."

"But who would be brazen enough to commit the murder in front of our security cameras?" Kirk asked.

"The killer used those cameras to advantage, hiding face and shape. And a text message sent to Miguel brought him to the office within minutes of the killing, as a possible suspect. Unfortunately for the killer, he came and went minutes too soon."

It was Ashley Cooper who interrupted at this point. "I wasn't here myself, but Chris says the security tapes show everyone in their offices at the time of the shooting. If that's true, and if Miguel was already gone, who could have done it?"

"Exactly!" Reynolds said, glancing in Ashley's direction as he followed the reasoning she'd outlined to him. "The only possible explanation is that the killer arrived in the office early and changed the digital clock that records the time for one of the security cameras."

Chris Fox was out of his seat. "Look here, if you think I—"

That was when Annie pressed the pager in her pocket, summoning the detective in overalls waiting outside. He entered with a triumphant flourish, holding several small pieces of wet rubber. "I found them in the toilet trap," he announced, "just like you thought, Sergeant."

It was Jenny Presburg who jumped up then, trying for the door. But Annie grabbed her by the waist. "All the time you were being sick in the restroom you were in there cutting up your Batman mask with manicure scissors and flushing it down the toilet."

Sergeant Reynolds made it official by arresting her and reading

her rights. She just shook her head, looking dazed. "How could you have known?"


"If anyone changed the time on their security camera, it almost had to be you. You told us you were the first one in the office that morning. It was Annie here who figured out what happened to the mask."

Later, after she'd been taken away and booked, Reynolds turned to Annie Sears. "We could have looked in the toilet trap for some real pieces of rubber, you know, rather than cutting up the mask you bought."

She merely smiled. "Why risk it? I knew she'd crack when she saw them."

"You did pretty well for your first case. First blood's not always that easy."

"I've had practice," she said. Then, "Do you have the phone number for the *Union Tribune*? There's a reporter I promised a scoop." 🦅



Mysterious meetings and readerly rendezvous are available
in The Readers Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

January is the Elephant's Graveyard of the movie industry—it's where crappy movies go to die: Long-delayed dramas plagued by bad buzz. Sequels to movies you've never heard of. Films in which Justin Timberlake or Cedric the Entertainer aren't making cameos . . . they're the stars. That's what gets dumped in cineplexes come the first of the year.

"It's too cold," the studios reason. "Nobody wants to drive to a movie theater."

And they're right. Which doesn't mean you can't catch some great flicks while Hollywood goes into hibernation.

Thanks to DVD home-delivery services such as Netflix and Blockbuster Online, you can program your own winter film festival and leave all the driving to the mailman. If you're stumped for choices, take heart: We've asked eight acclaimed novelists to name the DVDs they'd recommend for mystery fans trying to stay cozy on the couch until the spring thaw.

Charles Ardai, founding editor of *Hard Case Crime*, *Edgar- and Shamus Award-nominated author of *Little Girl Lost*, and AHMM contributor since 1989*

Nothing sets off a cold winter night like a bracing jolt of film noir, and some outstanding titles have been released on DVD in the past few years. *Plunder of the Sun* (based on a novel by David Dodge, author of



*Viggo Mortensen confronts his past in *A History of Violence*.*

Photo © New Line Productions

To Catch a Thief) stars the late Glenn Ford as a resourceful American hired to smuggle a mysterious package from Cuba into Mexico. *Touch of Evil* is Orson Welles's classic tale—now available in a version recut to Welles's final instructions—of a government narcotics man (Charlton Heston) going up against a border cop of questionable ethics (Welles himself,

in a memorably grotesque role). And Robert Mitchum's *Out of the Past* nicely presages the 2005 Oscar-nominated *A History of Violence*, with Mitchum as a man haunted by a murderous past he's tried to put behind him. Rent them both for a great double feature.

Laurie R. King, author of the popular Mary Russell and Kate Martinelli mysteries

The ideal post-Christmas movie, perfect for blowing away the cobwebs of gluttony, is *Dead Again* (1991). Look at the cast: Emma Thompson, Kenneth Branagh (both in front of the camera and behind it as director), Derek Jacobi, Andy Garcia, and Robin Williams. A glamorous murder and a haunted woman; suspicions that bud and flower; innocence that is transformed, as villains become their mirror image. And Hitchcock himself couldn't have done a better job of playing with and ultimately transforming the deliberate cheese factor: an amnesiac woman whose identity runs eerily parallel to the victim of a 1949 murder victim. Pardon me for leaving this review half finished, but I have to go and put this DVD on now.

Rupert Holmes, author of the novels Swing and Where the Truth Lies and writer of the upcoming Broadway mystery-musical CURTAINS

Thankfully, 20th Century Fox has abandoned its twenty-first century political correctness and correctly released the earliest of the studio's Charlie Chan classics on DVD. Today we cringe that the humble Honolulu police detective created by Earl Derr Biggers in 1925 has never

been portrayed on film by an Asian actor. But to confiscate these atmospheric period pieces because they (accurately) reflect the cultural standards of their time would be akin to banning any film in which Orson Welles or Laurence Olivier play Othello. This initial collection stars the original and finest Chan of talking pictures:



Charlie Chan #2 (Sidney Toler) with #2 son Victor Sen Yung

Warner Oland, whose handsome, burry voice imbues each line of faltering English with compassion and nobility. The "whodunit" was plain as day even in its day, but Oland's Chan is a moral force who sees murder as a crime against humanity and each victim's death as a profound tragedy. (P.S.: Don't confuse this collection with another from MGM, featuring Monogram Pictures's mid-'40s series, when



Chan #2 Sydney Toler was relocated to poverty row, and every other scene took place in an office with a filing cabinet.)

George Pelecanos, author of *The Night Gardener*, *Drama City*, and the *Derek Strange* mystery series

I recently watched several hours of the 1957-1963 television series *Have Gun, Will Travel* on DVD and was struck by the quality and intelligence of this half-hour Western drama. Richard Boone plays Paladin, a Shakespeare-quoting San Francisco playboy who answers newspaper ads and roams the West as a black-clad gun, often switching allegiances to the side of the wronged, much to the frustration of those who have hired him. Boone is both sensitive and rugged and is ably supported by up-and-comers like Jack Lord, Charles Bronson, Stuart Whitman, the beautiful Janice Rule, and others. Among the scriptwriters: Harry Julian Fink (*Dirty Harry*) and Gene "Star Trek" Roddenberry. Bernard Herrmann scored the first episode. Well worth checking out.

Lee Child, author of the *Jack Reacher* thrillers

The best crime DVDs? That's a tough question. So I'm going to duck it by suggesting three . . . all of them chosen the most elemental way: the movies or shows I've seen where afterward I've thought, "Damn, I wish I had written that!" First qualifier would be *The Third Man*. As a movie, it's a total classic. The Graham Greene novella it was based on wasn't as good, which is rare. That's my answer from the black-and-white era. In color, go for *Seven*. Fantastic hook, unflinching integrity all the way to the last frame. TV? Got to be the first season of *NYPD Blue*. It invented a whole new camera language—and the dialog was pure poetry. Outstanding.

Laura Lippman, author of the *Tess Monaghan* mysteries as well as *Every Secret Thing* and other stand alone thrillers

"Noodles, I slipped." Is there a better line in a crime movie? Not by my lights. That seminal moment in 1984's *Once Upon a Time in America*—the long version only, please, don't even try to watch the mutilation that is the short version—chills me every time I see it. After six or seven viewings, I'm still not sure I understand what happens when the film jumps to present-day, and almost all the adult actors (Robert De Niro, James Woods, Elizabeth McGovern) are upstaged by their young counterparts (Scott Tiler, Rusty Jacobs, Jennifer Connelly). But that's as it should be, for it's the film's early scenes, set in the Lower East Side of the early twentieth century, that give *Once Upon a Time* its resonance and power. Not director Sergio Leone's most perfect work, but my personal favorite.

Barry Eisler, author of the John Rain thriller series

Mystic River, Clint Eastwood's film based on the Dennis Lehane book, is an outstanding crime story. The film (like the book) seamlessly blends people, place, and plot in what becomes almost a Greek tragedy of violence and its repercussions. The acting, particularly by Sean Penn, is stunning. Speaking of Sean Penn, another of his stand-out performances can be found in *21 Grams*, written by Guillermo Arriaga and directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu and notable, too, for electrifying performances by Naomi Watts and Benicio Del Toro. The movie is a wrenching examination of coincidence, tragedy, revenge, and redemption. I can't conclude a discussion of crime stories on DVD without mentioning *The Sopranos*. It may be the best thing I've ever seen on television.

Eddie Muller, film noir historian and author of the novels *The Distance and Shadow Boxer*

Narc could be charged with assault and battery. This 2002 offering from writer/director Joe Carnahan has things I've wearied of in movies:

jacked-up violence, ear-splitting macho blather, and camerawork cranked on speed. But under its frantic surface pulses a powerful Rashomon-style story of guilt and obsession that lifts it far above routine cop drama. Jason Patric plays Nick Tellis, an undercover narcotics cop cracking up after wounding an innocent (and pregnant) bystander. He's reassigned to solve the murder of another narc who'd gotten so deep in, he may have crossed over to the other side. Tellis's partner is Lieutenant Henry Oak, a volatile exponent of vigilante justice who may have secrets of his own. Oak is played by Ray Liotta, who deserves some kind of lifetime achievement award for the intensity he's brought



Ray Liotta and Jason Patric blow their cover in *Narc*.
Photo © Paramount

to a long-running series of crime films, both good and bad. No matter the film, Liotta is never less than mesmerizing, and Henry Oak will go down in movie history as one of his signature performances. *Narc* is sophisticated visual storytelling, reeling out a stream-of-consciousness flood of sounds and images that challenge the intellect and get under the skin.



TEN LITTLE GANGSTERS

M. J. JONES

Me and Big Al were by ourselves in his Wisconsin place that fall morning, the rest of the boys being asleep in their tents or up the guard towers. I was practicing bank shots on the green-cloth in the parlor. Al was upstairs with a little blonde from Hayward.

So everything stood still and peaceable when Charley the Finn came skidding up the lane in that whiney flivver of his. Out he flopped, yowling for Al to come rescue him.

"Snorky," he yelled, calling Al by the nickname nobody ever said he could use. "Snorky, sumpin's gone wrong over at Short Nap's."

I ran outside and waved off the two boys charging up the lane, tommies at the ready. "S'okay," I hollered at them. "He's a pal."

"Snorky," Charley yelled again.

I grabbed him by his canvas galluses. "He's Mr. Capone to you and quit your yipping at him."

"It's terrible over there, Bill."

"That's Mr. Dekydd to you."

"Gimme a break, will ya?" Charley said, still all aflutter. "Everybody over there got it."

I had nary an idea what he meant 'cause you can't hardly understand those Up North yokels—they talk like they got mashed turnip stuck on their tonsils. I was about to shut him up but good when Al stuck his head out an upstairs window. "What's going on down there?"

"They're pfft, Snorky. All of 'em," Charley told him. "And I don't know how they got that way."

Me, I'd of thrown the dumb SOB back in the tamarack swamp he crawled out of. But Al's a Christian. He said, "Come on in the house, Charley. Then you can tell me about it."

On the way inside, Charley fell to blubbering even harder. "Short Nap's dead. They all are."

Short Nap was Napoleon Short, and I didn't care if the fat little bootlegger had knocked back his last finger of skee. Al sure

wouldn't either. Looked like the only one did was Charley the Finn.

But what did he mean, *everybody'd* got huffed?

When Charley was in the living room, warming his cheeks by the fire, Al came downstairs. He looked snorky as ever, all dressed up in his new hunting duds—leather jerkin, buffalo-plaid shirt, tweed britches tucked in high-top gum boots. He had a khaki hunting coat slung over his arm and a Jones cap in his hand.

It was pretty much the same outfit I had on. Everybody else too. That's what I liked about Al, he wanted his boys turned out good as him even when he had to pay Marshall Fields a hundred and twenty-five dollars a man to get it done.

Not that me and Al looked alike. We were about the same age—I turned twenty-eight that year—but he was a lot bigger, only a couple inches under six foot and heavy along with it. I was still skinny then, with a thick thatch of ginger hair and blue peeps I didn't need specs to see out.

Charley? He just looked like hell.

"Get the man a drink," Al said. "And not any of that backwoods hooch they make up here. Stuff'll kill you. Give him some of the real thing from Chicago."

What I wanted to give Charley was a kick in his britches. Boy had no business bothering Al on a Sunday morning. But I did like I was told and pulled a pony of needle beer out of the icebox. Chicago-made all right, but just near beer with a little alcohol shot in. I was blamed if I'd waste a bottle of South Side brew on the likes of squonking Charley in there.

Me, I'm Al's pick triggerman. Name's Bill Dekydd. Well, John Wilkes Dekydd, if you want to get legal about it. But I'm from down Arkansas way, and when I first came up here, folks just had to call me Arky. A couple busted snoots later and they agreed on Bill. Which is what my daddy wanted to name me in the first place, but Mama, who's not over the war yet, held out for John Wilkes.

Back in the parlor, Al had listened to Charley's story. When I came in with the beer, he was grinning at Charley. "Don't let the trouble over at Nap's keep you on the anxious seat," he said. "I'll get it simplitized for you."

Good as that might've sounded, Charley was still sweating bullets. Didn't blame him. You never knew with Al. He could be all glad-eye one second and killing crazy the next. I remember once in a blind pig in Cicero he was yucking it up with some Chicago bulls when one of 'em went and called him Scarface. Fellow was probably just dumb and drunk, but it still wasn't a healthy thing

for even a cop to say. Five minutes later, he came to with his beezer in the sawdust, a roscoe to his conk, and the Big Fellow on his back. Then he went for a little ride.

On t'other hand, Al liked to help folks: "Public service is my motto,"* he always said. It was Al that set the law on those two college punks killed that little boy back in '24, and he always got the Pinkertons off after they busted up a union man. He'd travel all over the country, too, go wherever a pal was in trouble—New York, Miami, Colorado, Los Angeles. Lordy, the man even went to Iowa.

That's pretty much how I got on with the Big Fellow. When he came down to Hot Springs in '25 to help my boss close up a mitt joint, he took a liking to the way I could fire a shotgun out of either fist, separate or together. "If you're ever in Chi," he said, "look me up. I'll find you a job."

A week later I was headed for Yankeeland.

Now, in the parlor of his hunting cabin, Al clapped Charley on the back: "At least Nap's out of the way. As for the rest of it . . ."

He turned to me: "We're going over to Nap's. You, me, and Charley here. Get somebody good to drive. What you packing, Charley?"

Charley tapped his jacket. "Belly gun," he said.

Al jerked his thumb at the gun case over by the stairs. "Take the sawyers, Bill, and a couple choppers."

Jumping Jerusalem, I thought. Tommy guns and sawed-offs both. What's he expecting to find at Short Nap's cabin?

That's what the driver wondered, too, when he came up to the house. "Big trouble, huh?" he said. "I'll take da goil back to town."

"Nope," I said. "Somebody else'll carry her back."

His name was Edward G. Caesar, and he thought he was the sheik of Araby, sporting those long, pointy sideburns and black hair he currycombed with Wildroot. Truth be known, Eddy was just a dem-dese-dose guy out of Brooklyn. And he was even harder to understand than Charley. Al should've made him go to night school, like he did me. "You want to be somebody," Al always said, "you gotta sound like a gent."

Eddy said, leastways I think he said, "We better stick da heat under da floorboard. Don't want some backwoods deputy getting put to bed 'cause he seen what he shouldn't."

"Laws is way too dainty, come out on a day like this," I said.

A storm'd begun in the night, a ripsnorter with hard rain and big wind. By now, late morning, only the rain kept on. Sometimes it was just cold spit, then it'd up and turn to a real goose-drowner.

"Dem roads gonna be bad," Eddy said. "Maybe Mr. Capone oughta go a different day."

You ask me, Eddy didn't want to go. The boy could drive better than Barney Olds himself, but that's all she wrote. He was a one-trick pony. When the lead started flying, Eddy headed for the can.

We took one of the closed cars, an A sedan, maybe not the flashiest car in the fleet, but the weather was too cold for a flivver, and the muddy roads couldn't handle Al's big, lead-lined Caddy.

Usually, Eddy drove, with me riding shotgun and Al tucked safe and sound behind us. Today, though, Al said he'd get up front with Eddy and I should sit with Charley in the back.

"Rats!" I said and hauled out my pocket pistol, took a swig, then offered it to Eddy.

"Stuff come with you from Chicago? 'Cause I ain't drinking no rotgut from up here. No telling what dese dumb rubes put in it."

"This here's genuine Cutty Sark scotch," I told him. "Straight off one of Mr. Joe Kennedy's own boats."

Eddy took the flask. When he handed it back, it was plumb empty.

Fact is, Eddy needed every drop of whiskey he could drink. We all did. The trip to Short Nap's place turned out to be thirty miles of pure woe. That country up there's either hill or swamp. And back then, the North Woods being pretty much lumbered out, it was covered with nothing but bramble bush, mossy old stumps, and straggly young pine. The roads? Even the ones with highway numbers weren't much more than jumped-up logging tracks.

And that was on the best of days. This day, the rain'd turned them into hog wallows. For three long hours we either rode in water lapping at the running boards or bumped up and down one rocky grade after another. I can't recollect how many times we had to get out and push. Al, too, huffing and puffing and cussing in two lingoos.

Worse yet, when we weren't stuck in the mud, I was stuck listening to Charley Dumdummy from Duluth explain how he came to be so powerful interested in Napoleon Short from Chi-town.

The cause was about what you'd expect: Short Nap tried to horn in on Charley's rum fleet. The year before, somebody put a couple new sneakers on Superior to carry the groceries out of Canada. At first, Charley ignored it. He had plenty putt-putts of his own, never mind aeroplanes moving pig iron summer and winter both. Then the Mounties made a couple seizures, and you didn't have to be bit by a fox to figure out who paid them for their trouble.

"So," Charley said, "I decided I better take Nap out. Do it during duck season. Make it look like he got tangled up in his 12-gauge."

Charley figured his plan would work because Al wasn't the only Chicago businessman that took vacations in northern Wisconsin. Over to Barker Lake a Joliet boy was building himself a golf course, and Al's own brother had land near Mercer. But Short Nap had gone and done everybody one better. He bought a whole island.

It stood in a big lake called Sis-koom-bah or some such and lay so deep in the middle of nowhere even the Chippewa'd never heard of it. Besides that, Charley told us, after you finally found the old lumber track that served for Nap's lane and wound around for a bunch of miles, all you came to was the bank of the lake. And that was nothing but lily pads and fallen logs and big patches of wild rice.

"If Nap expects you," Charley said, "you find a boat. And the dingdang lake's so big, even if you light down in a sea gull, you still need a boat."

'Course, Nap had guards posted at his boat launch. Charley said they stayed in an old Army tent with nothing much to do but play cards and gripe about their miseries. Couldn't blame 'em. It's no fun sleeping on a spindly cot with the coon prowling round and the deer mice eating your smokes.

When we pulled up to the guard post, we didn't find any mice or coon or cards. Nap's guards, neither. What we found was two stiffies and Ross Kolnikov.

Ross was the boy Charley planned to turn loose on Short Nap once he had him trapped on his island. Instead, all poor Ross got to do was shiver in the damp while Charley ran for Al.

"Anything new?" Charley asked him when he met the car.

Ross blinked at him. "Never seen nothing."

Matter of fact, there wasn't much to see. Just the guards' tent and a couple of boats tied up to the rickety little pier.

Al looked pretty disgusted about this arrangement, and I expect he was. Al never went after anything or anybody without a solid angle and lots of backup.

Charley explained how he'd planned a night raid on Nap by canoe, the one at the pier. But about midnight, when he and Ross snuck up to the tent ready to blow the guards to their Maker, they found them stone dead in a wallow of guns and bottles and puddles of puke.

Now Nap's triggermen lay in the tent under a piece of tarp. When Eddy peeled it back, Al gazed down on the two boys and shook his head. "We're making a shooting gallery out of a great business," he said. "And nobody is profiting."*

But they hadn't been shot. Nor hooked or dug. Strangled, neither.

However they got dead, I recognized one of them as Jack di Rippa, an old boy the newspapers liked to describe as "a known criminal, with a special fondness for aging streetwalkers."

Charley poked a toe toward the t'other, a dark little fellow with a wine bottle by his hand. "Used to be one of my mugs," he said. "Name of Shicklgruber. Just off the boat and always bragging about some cousin back in the old country—politician, paper-hanger, something like that."

By now Al was mad, like he always got when good Joes clicked it. "I curse whoever done this," he shouted, shaking his cigar in the air.

His face turned dark red and his scars started to glow like white-hot coals. "Why can't we treat our business like any other man treats his, something to work at in the daytime and forget when he goes home at night? There's plenty of business for everybody. Why kill each other over it?"*

Then Al was all at once calm again. "Okay, Charley," he said. "Let's get back to your plan for Nap. How'd you keep tabs on him?"

"Just had him followed around," Charley said. "He never seemed to care, even bought the trailer a Green River one time. Anybody got a fag?"

Eddy broke out a pack of humps, and both men lit up.

Charley said, "I had the island staked out all summer and fall—fellows on the lake looking like fishermen or in the brush making like poachers. Even got some Chippewa to keep an eye on the place while they was gathering the wild rice."

"Nap come out to the island a lot?"

"Not once since June. Nobody else, neither. Even the guards never went over 'cause there wasn't a boat for 'em to use. Nap brought the only one with him yesterday."

Charley pointed his Camel toward the big rowboat by the pier. "Him and the others came in the afternoon, and the Kraut rowed 'em out to the island. Took a couple trips."

I said, "How you know that?"

"He already told ya," Eddy said, jerking his butt right up to my kisser. "Charley was on their tail, and even a hillbilly like you musta hoid of field glasses."

This was going to be the end of Edward G. Caesar. "Listen, you yeller Yankee—"

Big Al stepped in. "Cut it out, both of you. Think about these two dead fellows. What do you want to do, get yourself killed before you're thirty? You'd better get some sense while a few of us are left alive."*

While Charley rowed Al and me and Eddy across the lake—Ross stayed with the stiff—I could see the island was as naked as the rest of that poor, timbered-out country. Except for a blanket of bush and a little stand of cedar, the island was picked clean as a chicken at Christmas.

Which was just the way Nap planned it. "Nobody's gonna jump outta the woods at me," he once told Al. "And with the lake for protection, I don't have to bother building guard towers."

As for his big log house, it sure wasn't the kind of cabin I grew up in—ramshackle pine over the dirt floor, swarming with young'uns and a pack of hounds to keep you from freezing to death come January. No siree, this house was made of fat brown logs with a shake roof and pretty green shutters that would've looked good even in Winnetka.

After we tied up at the island pier, Al told Eddy to check out the three little outbuildings, then come back and stay with the boat.

"We're going in the house," he said to me and Charley. "Get out your gat, Charley. Bill, you bring our guns."

The rain started in again as we walked up the gravel path, Al smoking his cigar, me carrying the bag of iron, Charley pointing a .38 at his foot.

The big oak front door, with irises and what looked like a beehive carved into it, stood wide open. Al sent Charley inside to see if the place was like he'd left it.

"Just like it," Charley said when he came back, though he didn't look happy over saying so.

Al and me stepped into what Short Nap likely called his foyer but which looked more like the hat check at the Aragon Ballroom. It held fur coats and fedoras, cloaks and cloches. A brown deer-stalker hung from a wooden peg.

"Uh-oh," Al said, when he saw the dead guy on the wide-planked floor.

"Just like when I was here before," Charley said.

Al stooped to look at the body. "Willy 'the Shake' Iago," he said. "Ex-doughboy, like all Nap's triggermen. Heard he won lots of medals in the war. Much good they did him in here."

Next to Willy was a silver hip hootch. A Chicago typewriter leaned against the wall.

We stepped over Iago's body and into the dining room.

"Will you look at this," Al said when he saw the room. "Place is bigger than Holy Name Cathedral."

It was something all right, with a bank of windows running along one whole side, walk-in fireplaces at each end, and log

rafters big around as Al's waist. Wide flagstone hearths held half a dozen overstuffed chairs made out of purple plush with little gold irises woven in. Above the fireplaces—their fires still a-smolder—hung the prettiest stuffed heads you ever did see.

Stretched twixt the two fireplaces was a long table covered with a fancy white cloth. On it sat liquor bottles and silver forks and china eatware. It also bore the remains of a fat Virginia ham and three dead men.

Not just any dead men either. Slumped on that table were the corpses of some of the best bootleggers in Senator Volstead's America.

We gazed at them, real quiet-like, till Al broke in. "Now ain't this just a shame?" he said.

Then he smiled.

"Whatcha think happened here, Mister Capone?" Charley asked.

"You tell us, bright boy."

"I . . . I . . . I . . ."

"Ah, shut up and lemme think," Al said.

The room was just like the guard tent—a little puke and no blood at all. Short Nap, decked out in a come-to-Jesus suit, sat slumped in his chair at the head of the table. On his left, half fallen on the floor, was a young fellow also wearing tails.

"Mickey Carleone," Al said with a sigh. "From back East. I do business with his brother Don. He's gonna be awful sore about this."

Further along the table came still another man in a monkey suit—Dr. Arthur C. Moriarity, face smack down in his plate. Doc used to teach chemistry at some jerkwater college out in Iowa. That is, till Big Al came to town and learned him real chemistry.

"Look at all that booze, will ya," Charley said, pointing at the table.

And he was right. There was bottle on bottle. I don't know how many or what they all held. Lots of whiskey, for sure, every bottle of it with a label claiming it was genuine bottled-in-the-bond. No siree, no aged-in-the-barn squirrel dew on Napoleon Short's table. Just plenty of old French cream, lots of Minnehaha water, and veeno in every color of the rainbow.

I'd set the guns down and picked up a bottle of something called amaretto—it smelled like nuts—when I noticed that a few of the embroidered chairs around the table stood empty. While Al and Charley were still tut-tutting, I pulled up the tablecloth.

"There's three skirts under here," I said.

Al's eyes slewed toward Charley. "Didn't you say you only saw two get in the boat?"

"I thought I seen just the two, but how do you know these days? The broads all got their hairs bobbed."

"Well, there's three here now," I said. "And one deader'n the next."

"Haul 'em out," Al said. "So we can get 'em sorted."

Charlie and I grabbed a pair of silk-stockinged mumblypegs and yanked. Out from under the table came the body of a black-headed jane. She was maybe twenty years old and dressed fit to kill in a green evening frock.

When Al saw her, he nodded his head. "Shouldn't be a surprise," he said.

I asked how come.

"Know who this frail is? This is Antonia Metz-Soprano," Al said. "From back East."

Back East folks were always erasing each other.

"The Metz-Sopranos have been singing," Al said.

"To John Law?"

"The Feds."

"Can they carry a tune?" I asked.

"Depends on who's listening."

I said, "If it's another'n like that Eliot Mess, no point getting all lathered-up. Boy smashes a couple beer barrels, thinks he oughta have a Congressional Medal. Fact is, him and them gumps of his couldn't find their way outta the Loop without calling in the Rainbow Girls."

Al grinned. "There's a lot of mob guys might not be casual as you where it comes to squawkers."

He took out his Cuban stogies, offered them around. "How about it, Charley?"

Charley nearly had his cigar lit before he figured out what Al was getting at.

"Jeepers, Mr. Capone," he said, the Havana dropping from his fingers. "I didn't do this. I swear on my grandmother's knees I didn't."

Al grinned again. "I know you didn't. Whoever did's got more than cheese for brains."

Charley couldn't dare take offense, so he picked up the cigar and went to stand by the window, smoking and peering into the drizzle.

Me, I'd passed on the stogie—I'd rather blow up a tailor-made Fatima—and was taking a looksee at the Metz-Soprano dame. "No blood on her. Only a little puke, just like on the men."

When we pulled out the other two bodies—a redhead and a blonde, both bottle jobs—it was the same.

"How many's that make now?" Al asked.

I ticked them off on my fingers—the three triggermen, the six at the dinner table. “Nine,” I said.

Al again shook his head in puzzlement.

After a while he said, “Know who the two fems are, don’t you?”

“Sure. Bessy James and that doll Doc Moriarity’s been playing with lately.”

“Bessy was Short Nap’s payoff man, you know. Very smart lady.”

“If she was so smart,” I said, “how’d she wind up under a dinner table, dead as any Dumb Dora?”

From his spot by the window, Charley said, “Never seen how he could put a frill in charge of his brass.”

Al said, “Nap stumbled onto her when she was just a kid in his stable. She wasn’t much good on the game, he claimed. But, oh boy, could she diddle numbers.”

Al squatted beside red-haired Bessy, his britches stretched almost as tight over his wide butt as the black silk crepe was over hers. He lifted her diamond choker to show a yellow iris tattoo.

“Nap always liked a union label on his merchandise,” I said.

“Bet we won’t find any tattoos on that one,” Al said, nodding at the other gal. “Her name’s Isabel Lecter, and she’s a student dietitian.”

Isabel, blond as Mary Pickford, had on a white middy blouse, pleated tweed skirt, kid-leather oxfords.

“Girl must’ve got the wrong invitation,” Al said as he stood up. “She sure isn’t dressed for a formal supfest like everybody else is.”

“But she’s cold meat anyhow,” Charley said.

“Out,” Al told him, cocking a thumb toward the door. “Now.”

When Charley had gone, Al picked up one of the wine bottles. It was labeled Chateau de Froggy or some such, though I doubted anything French was inside. Short Nap had a cellar full of fancy labels, and the fakers to print them.

Al sniffed at the wine bottle and a couple of other empties. Then he held some of the gin and whiskey bottles to the light before opening and sniffing them too.

“Did Charley say who brought the liquor?” he asked.

“Said Nap brought it all up hisself, early in the summer. Said Nap’s boys wouldn’t let anybody else come on the island with so much as a split in their hand.”

Al already knew—and it was a sore point with him—that Nap would only drink, or serve, his own stuff. Even when he sat in Al’s offices at the Hawthorne Hotel, smoking Al’s Cubans, he still sipped from the tickler he kept in his pocket.

“Look for his flask,” Al told me. “The others’ too. Bessy’ll have hers strapped to her right thigh.”

I grinned when I found it. Al was some hijacker all right.

Meantime, he'd set to inspecting the Virginia ham and its fixings, poking and slicing and sniffing. But never, I saw, tasting of anything.

When he was done with the table and the flasks, he went to the kitchen. Except for the boxes the food came in—they were from a North Avenue delicatessen—the kitchen was cold, damp, and empty.

Back in the dining room, Al ran a hand over the whiskers he liked to raise when he came up north. He still looked puzzled.

He was poking around in the ashtrays on the table and I'd moseyed over to the windows when Charley came bursting back in. "Al, come quick! Eddy's pooped."

Sure enough, inside one of Short Nap's sheds, Eddy lay dead. I can't say I was very sorry about it.

There was no blood on the shed's dirt floor or on any of the rough, empty shelves and when Charley checked Eddy over, all he found was a pearl-handled .44, a half-empty wine split, and two herds of Camels.

Al asked Charley what was in the other two sheds.

"One of 'em's empty," Charley said. "The other's just got a bunch of dead soldiers in it."

Back in the house, we stood by one of the big fireplaces, smoking and warming up. Al went back to scratching his whiskers.

Presently, Charley got glasses and an unopened bottle of wine from the table. When he'd found a corkscrew, he pulled the plug and poured three goodly dollops of some French stuff.

As Al and me stuck our noses in our glasses, Charley raised his and uttered every bootlegger's favorite toast—"Prohibition now, Prohibition tomorrow, Prohibition forever."

The words were barely in the air when Al's glass went splintering onto the stone hearth. He slapped away my own glass, then Charley's.

While me and Charley stood there with our jaws around our belt buckles, Al pointed at the broken glass and spilt wine. "Poison," he said.

"Hunh?"

"You dopes!" Al said. "They've all been poisoned. The ones in here, that boy in the hall, Eddy, the ones across the lake. All of 'em."

He wheeled on Charley. "And I don't like it! Poison just ain't American! My rackets are run on strictly American lines and they're going to stay that way."*

For a minute, Charley looked like he'd been smacked with an oak towel.

I said, "What you mean poison?"

"Can't you smell it?"

"Hunh?"

"The bitter almond," Al said. "It's cyanide."

I'd smelled something like almonds around the table, but I thought it came from that amaretto stuff. Charley, finding himself still among the living, swore he didn't smell a thing.

We went to the table, where Al picked up one of the wine bottles and shoved it under my nose. "Smell it?"

I did. "But how you know it's cyanide?"

"Read about it in Agatha Christie," Al said, and right then I decided I better get my own set of the Harvard Classics.

"I never poisoned nobody," Charley said. He was still plenty scared.

Lucky for Charley, Al had calmed down. "I know you didn't," he said. "And I'll prove it. Go out to that shed and bring back half a dozen dead soldiers."

When Charley'd gone, I said, "If Charley didn't kill 'em, who did?"

Al settled his bulk in one of the purple plush easy chairs. Folding diamond-ringed hands over his belly, he said, "It was an accident."

I picked up on the notion right off. "So you're saying Nap wanted to do Doc or the Carleone kid and slipped up, put poison in everybody's drinks?"

"Now, now, Bill," the Big Fellow said. "You know Nap was too smart for that."

I pointed at the table. "One of them did it, then."

"They couldn't've delivered enough poison."

"Not even Doc or his dietitian gal?"

"Use your head, Bill. Think Nap's boys woulda taken a drink off Doc Moriarity, much less his girlfriend?"

"That brings us back to Charley."

"Charley's a man!" Al snapped. "He'da come in with guns blazing."

Charley came in now, arms loaded with empty wine bottles.

"Take a whiff of 'em," Al said.

Sure enough, the bottles smelt of bitter almonds.

Al said, "You boys know plenty about making hooch. But you don't know anything about wine, do you?"

We admitted we didn't.

"When you make wine, 'specially white wine, and you want it to look and taste real good, you have to do something to clarify it," he said. "That's called fining, and most often it's done with cyanide."

Al lit a Havana. "I won't bore you with all of how it works, but sometimes it doesn't go right, and the wine gets poisoned."

"You didn't learn that out of no book," I said. "More like in your daddy's basement."

Al winked at me and puffed his stogie.

But I was still a little confused. "How come these folks went and downed what was pretty much straight prussic acid?"

"Simple," Al said. "Nap's booze is always so bad, nobody knew what they were drinking."

"We're sure in a tough business," I said.

"You're right about that," Al said, sounding a mite sad. "It's a thankless one and full of grief."*

By now, Charley had stuck his nose in half a dozen wine bottles. Finally, looking like a bluetick that can't tree his coon, he turned to Al. "Don't smell like nothing," he said.

"These stiffs sure will pretty soon," Al said, standing up. "Let's go, Bill."

Charley let out a yelp. "But, Mr. Capone, that's why I come to you. I don't know what I'm s'posed to do with all these dead people. The cops'll think I killed 'em."

"What were you gonna do after you and Ross came in here with your artillery?"

"Roll 'em in the lake?" Charley said, not sounding too sure about it.

"Well, do what you have to. And don't worry about the cops. I'll get the blame anyhow. They've already hung everything on me but the Chicago fire."*

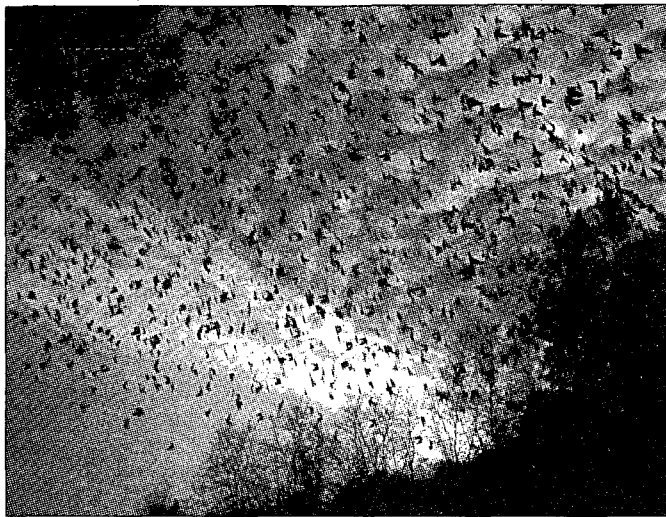
A few days later, as we drove back to Chicago, Al said, "You know, boys, you gotta have a product that everybody needs every day. We don't have it in booze. Except for the luses, most people only buy a couple of fifths of gin or scotch when they're having a party. The workingman laps up half a dozen bottles of beer on Saturday night, and that's it for the week."

It had quit raining, and afternoon sun now poured over the Wisconsin countryside.

"But with milk!" Al said. "Every family wants it on the table. The people on Lake Shore Drive want thick cream in their coffee. The big families out back of the yards have to buy a couple of gallons of fresh milk every day for the kids . . . Do you guys know there's a bigger markup in fresh milk than there is in alcohol? Honest to God, we've been in the wrong racket right along."✍

* *Alphonse Capone, quoted in The Quotable Al Capone, edited by Mark Levell and Bill Helmer (The Chicago Typewriter Co. & Mad Dog Press, 1990).*

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Coming Home to Roost

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

EXPLOITATION

J. M. GREGSON

Nellie Ganton would be eighty next birthday. When she was young, her friends had sometimes called her Nell Gwynne and made suggestive remarks about boobs and oranges, but those days had now long gone. That was a pity, because she'd rather enjoyed them.

Nellie had a problem. Many problems, really, most of which came with old age, but one which was entirely new to her. She'd always got on well with the series of home helps the Council had provided for her. And they in turn had enjoyed working for this lively, bright-eyed old lady who had such very modern views about a lot of things. They'd enjoyed talking to Nell about politics, about the war, which had been long over when they were born, about the village school where Nell had taught and provided the foundation in life for so many children.

The latest home help was a problem. Kate Stubbs was a buxom, cheerful woman in her late thirties, with three lively children, the youngest of whom occasionally accompanied her to Nellie's bungalow during school half-terms and holidays. Kate enjoyed a cup of tea and a gossip about the latest happenings in the town with Nellie. "I try to bring a little of the big world outside in with me to my old people, who can't get about as they used to do," Kate Stubbs said breezily, and on the whole, she succeeded.

She worked well enough, even if her standards were a little slapdash for the still precise and observant Mrs. Ganton. But Kate Stubbs wasn't honest.

Nellie Ganton, who knew far better than to condemn anyone lightly, came to that conclusion reluctantly. The things that began to disappear were of no great value. The little teapot, which had gone from the back of the shelf in the kitchen, had been cracked for years. The set of fish knives, which had been a wedding present fifty-five years ago, had never been used. She would have been quite content to give them away, if she had been asked. Even the painting of the horse from the third bedroom, which had been her husband's study, had surely held no great value. It had been

crudely executed, and in all truth, she would have got rid of it years ago if it hadn't been for the fact that Walter had rather liked it.

Nellie had been a widow for five years now, and she missed Walter far more than she admitted to anyone. He had been a tall man, stooping a little in his last years, but always smiling and invariably polite. She could see him now, lifting his trilby hat to the ladies, in that old-fashioned gesture, which they seemed to like so much. She could see him but not speak to him, not ask him for his advice. At this moment, Nellie Ganton desperately needed advice.

She didn't know what to do about Kate Stubbs. She'd had the odd case of petty pilfering among her children forty years ago and had dealt with it swiftly and effectively. But once she had become head teacher, the school had been her kingdom. It had been the place where she had made the rules and reigned with confidence, working to combine justice with compassion, relying on the trust of parents and relationships she had built with them over the years of their children's education.

This was different. It made Nellie feel old and very vulnerable. She tried dropping hints to Mrs. Stubbs, tried letting her know that she suspected, even knew, what was going on. Nellie was sitting on an upright chair and looking at her old dining table, not at the culprit, as she said, "I'm probably mistaken, and I don't want to do anything about it, Kate. I just want it to stop."

But she was aware even as she spoke that she sounded diffident rather than certain, that the words weren't coming out with her old authority. Right was on her side, and she should be in control of the situation. But she wasn't, and she knew it. And if she knew it, then Kate Stubbs certainly would.

She did. She gave one glance at the bent grayhead over the table, went back to dusting the sideboard beneath the photographs of Walter Stubbs and the grandchildren in Australia, and said, "I've no idea what you're talking about, I'm sure. And I wouldn't go saying things like that, if I were you, Mrs. Ganton. Not if you know what's good for you."

Kate bustled into some noisy and vigorous vacuuming, brushing the machine hard against the slippered feet beneath the table when Nellie Ganton did not move. After ten minutes of this, she switched off the vacuum and stood panting a little, watching the old lady, who had not moved at all since she had made her original accusation. Kate didn't feel at all threatened by this creature with the bent shoulders and the thinning, whitening hair. She was surprised by the sense of power she felt, in the face of the frailty

at the table. Indeed, for some reason she could not fathom, Kate Stubbs felt quite excited.

She said, "I'll make us a cup of tea now, and we'll enjoy it together. Have one of our little chats, if you like. Least said, soonest mended, I always think." She banged two mugs on the table by the bent head, enjoyed watching the humped shoulders rear upward in shock.

Even when the social worker came in for her six-month review of the situation, Nellie Ganton hesitated to speak. A woman's reputation and career were at stake here. Mrs. Stubbs might not find it easy to get other work that would fit in with caring for her children if she lost her job with the Council. Nellie would like her to be warned, not sacked, told to mend her ways and keep her light fingers under proper control. But Nellie couldn't be certain that that was what would happen if she spoke up about this. She wasn't in control of the situation as she had been for all those years in her school.

And she realized for the first time that she was frightened of Mrs. Stubbs, frightened of the younger woman's physical strength and of her own weakness.

It was the social worker who gave her the opening, after they had discussed Nellie's visits to her doctor and arranged for the chiropodist to call. She said breezily, "And how are you getting on with our Mrs. Stubbs?"

"She's a good cleaner," said Nellie woodenly.

"One of our best," said the social worker, snatching a look at her watch, then feeling embarrassed as she realized that the sharp gray eyes opposite her had caught the glance.

Nellie Ganton understood perfectly in that moment that this well-meaning woman was under pressure, that she had other people to see, that she was doing her best with the limited time she could allot to Nellie in a crowded day. She said rather desperately, "I did have one reservation about her, though. It's probably something that could be put right with a word from you."

"And what was that, Mrs. Ganton?" The social worker was immediately wary. These finicky old women who brought their standards from a different age didn't realize how lucky they were sometimes. Of course, you had to make allowances; when they were stuck in their own homes all the time, you couldn't expect them to know much about the real world outside, which went on without them. People like Mrs. Ganton couldn't really be expected to know that home helps were like gold dust, that there were never enough of them to go round, that she was really very lucky to have people looking after her like this.

Nellie found herself staring at her table again. "It's difficult, really. Things have been—well, disappearing."

The social worker's face froze. "We have to be very careful, you know, Mrs. Ganton. We don't want to go saying things that we might regret, do we?"

"We aren't saying anything. I am trying to tell you something about one of the Council's employees. I am trying to tell you something that might be quite important." Nellie hadn't meant to be waspish, but she had never liked other people telling her what she thought.

The social worker looked at her watch again, this time making no attempt to disguise the gesture. "I have to say that it's my opinion that you should think very carefully about this, Mrs. Ganton. I've known people to get themselves into all kinds of trouble over accusations like this, you know. When people get older and live on their own, they get to imagining all kinds of things. I had one of my ladies say something silly only last year. It wasn't her fault really—her mind was beginning to go a little, we think. Anyway, she's in a home now, where her imagination can't run away with her. Best thing for everybody, I suppose, in the long run."

She got out as quickly as she could, shutting out the image of Nellie Ganton standing in the doorway, staring bleakly after her as she drove away. She hoped she hadn't been too harsh with the old lady. You had to remind yourself sometimes that they'd been quite important people in their own day, these old dears. She told her staff that all the time.

Nothing happened for a month. Nellie Ganton and Kate Stubbs moved warily around each other in the little bungalow, watching each other like animals guarding their territory. They exchanged much the same greetings and pleasantries as they had done before Nellie made her discoveries, the small phrases, which normally oil the wheels of life between people from different backgrounds. But the words had lost that function now; they rang false and hollow between two friends who had become adversaries. Kate Stubbs got on with the cleaning, and the woman she was here to help made sure that she was in the room next door to her. It was rather ridiculous, but it seemed to work. Nellie began to hope that the issue had been resolved without anyone suffering too severely.

Then the little carriage clock from the spare bedroom disappeared. It had no great value; it was a cheap thing to start with, and it hadn't worked for years. But it had been the first real gift that her son had bought for her when he was thirteen, and Walter had always kept it in pride of place on his old bureau.

Nellie had a sleepless night before Mrs. Stubbs's next visit. She

said before Kate had taken her coat off, "The clock's gone missing from the spare bedroom. The one that Chris gave to me."

"What clock was that, Mrs. Ganton?" Kate's blue eyes stretched wide in inquiry.

"The little brass carriage clock. You must remember it."

"Can't say that I do, Nellie. You're sure you're not imagining things?"

"Quite sure." Nellie looked her full and firm in the face this time: She had determined on that as she tossed restlessly in the first gray light of this long day.

"Only the mind begins to play strange tricks as you get towards eighty. I've seen it often in the people I work for. You're eighty next week, Nellie, aren't you? Most of them end up in homes, once they begin to have fancies like that. I wouldn't like that to happen to you, Nellie. I really wouldn't." She had a strange little smile on her face as she went to plug in the vacuum.

Kate Stubbs brought a garish old vase with her when she came the next week. She'd never liked it, from the day it had been given to her years ago by her mother-in-law. When she filled up with petrol at the garage, she picked up a little bunch of spray carnations. "I brought you some flowers for your birthday," she said unctuously to Nellie Ganton when the old lady opened the door to her. She pushed past her, went into the kitchen, and said breezily over her shoulder, "The twenty-third of October—I expect you thought I'd forget, but I didn't. I even stuck this vase in the car, in case you hadn't anything to put them in."

Nellie made a clumsy, artificial thanks; this was the last thing she had expected from a woman she had now established as an enemy. They hardly spoke at all for the hour of the visit. When Kate was leaving, Nellie managed to muster the words, "It was nice of you to think of my birthday. The carnations are very pretty, aren't they?"

Kate Stubbs gave her a rather mirthless smile and drove away. She was pleased with what she had done, though. If there were any comebacks for things missing, a birthday present would be tangible evidence of how she had felt tenderly for the old girl, how she had done her very best to be a friend to her.

It was the autumn half-term the next week, and Kate brought her son Charlie with her. He was a bright nine year old, and his mother was surprised how well he got on with Nellie, how much the decrepit old woman seemed to know about children. The boy was very keen on football, and Nellie got out Walter's old programs; from matches he had attended in the fifties and sixties.

Kate came in and found her son immersed in the study of the forty-year-old programs from Tottenham and Arsenal. "I haven't

seen him read like that in months!" she said. "I find it difficult to get him to read anything, with the telly always on and the other kids around."

"He'll read what interests him," said Nellie calmly. "Get him plenty of stuff about football, then get him to go on to other things from that. I still have some children's books that will interest him. We'll have a look before he goes, if you like."

Kate Stubbs was more interested in the football programs. They were worth a bit, those things. Ten, twenty, even thirty pounds, sometimes. She'd seen something about it on that *Flog It* program on the telly. She tried not to sound too eager as she said, "He's interested in those old programs, though, at the moment, isn't he?" She gestured to the spread-eagled shape of her son on the carpet, poring over the programs he had spread out there.

"Charlie's certainly very taken with them, yes," said Nellie Ganton, staring down at the child fondly, glad to be taken back forty years in the bond she had established with him whilst his mother was cleaning the bathroom.

Kate Stubbs tried not to sound too eager. "They're only old tat, those things, aren't they? Do you suppose he could take them home with him? I'm really anxious to get him into the habit of reading, the way you said I should."

Nellie pursed her lips, looked a little troubled. "I don't suppose they've any material value, no. But they were Walter's, you see. They do have a certain sentimental value for me."

"Oh, we'd bring them back, of course. Not that they'd be any great loss. You should really be thinking of clearing out some of your rubbish, you know. You have to be ruthless, as you said yourself. Ruthlessness is something I find old people aren't very good at."

Whereas you are very good indeed at it, thought Nellie. Both of them knew that if the programs left her bungalow, they would never come back to it. But it was true that the place was too crowded, that she should be clearing out some of the stuff she would never use again. She could spare Walter's old football programs better than most things, and young Charlie would certainly be delighted to have them. But he shouldn't be allowed to "borrow" them and never return them. That would be very bad training for the boy.

Nellie said, "I think I'd like Charlie to have them for good, you know." She smiled down on the boy's delighted round face as he looked up at her.

"Oh, we couldn't just take them without giving you something in exchange," said Kate Stubbs, putting the token resistance,

scarcely believing that she was going to be able to take away this latest trophy quite legitimately.

Nellie looked vaguely round the room, shaking her head. Then her gaze lighted on the fading carnations, and her eyes lit up. "You could leave me the vase you brought with the flowers for my birthday, if you like," she said. "I've rather taken a fancy to it. It's cheerful, you see, for fading old eyes like mine."

Kate could scarcely believe her luck. She had intended to dump the vase here when she brought it with the flowers last week. She'd be glad to have the garish thing out of her own house for good. And she might get sixty or seventy pounds for those programs, once Charlie's first enthusiasm was over and she could sneak them out of his room. She tried not to sound too eager as she said, "You keep it, Nellie. Count it as part of my birthday gift, eh?"

Charlie Stubbs and his mother were both delighted as she drove away from Nellie Ganton's bungalow. Kate would have been a little disturbed if she had known that there was an equally happy third party gazing at the despised vase in the living room of the bungalow.

The nice young man from next door but one had only worked at the auction room for the last month. He was very pleased to take the vase into the sale room for old Mrs. Ganton. He was not only pleased, but also impressed when he brought her back a check for eleven hundred pounds. A rare and early Clarice Cliff design, as Nellie had said. And even more rare for being signed. It seemed they knew a thing or two after all, these old 'uns.

The social worker called the day after the summary of the sale and the account of Mrs. Ganton's vase had been carried by the local paper. She was nervous. Her words came out in a rush, as if she wanted to get through them before Nellie could argue. "I'll be sending in a new home help for you, Mrs. Ganton. Mrs. Stubbs doesn't want to come here anymore. You won't know the new lady, but I've had very good reports about her. Her name's Debbie Haynes."

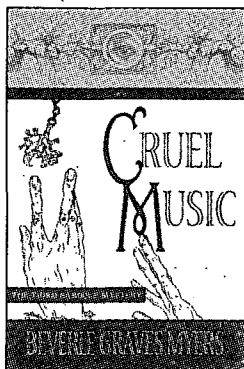
Nellie Ganton's smile extended this time to those bright gray eyes. "I do know Debbie, as a matter of fact. I taught her to read, forty years or so ago. A friendly, honest little girl. She will be most welcome." 🐾

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Music fills the spheres and, increasingly, the pages of mystery novels. No matter how esoteric your musical tastes, it seems likely that you can find a mystery with a theme to match. Take for instance these three recent offerings from Poisoned Pen Press that shatter glass with operatic arias, tickle the ivories with a ragtime theme, and cavort wildly during a folk festival.

Beverle Graves Myers transports readers to eighteenth-century Italy in her third Baroque mystery, which revolves around the deadly intrigue surrounding the election of a new pope. *CRUEL MUSIC* (Poisoned Pen, \$22.95) follows *Painted Veil* and *Interrupted Aria* and features castrato Tito Amato whose peripatetic musical career has taken the Venetian singer throughout Europe. In his latest outing, Amato's longed-for return to his beloved Venice and "long mornings in my dressing gown, sipping chocolate and catching up on the gazettes" is doomed when the family home that Tito shares with his merchant seaman brother, Alessandro, his sister, and her English artist husband is rudely invaded by the Venice constabulary in the service of Senator Montorio, the state inquisitor.



Tito is arrested, and thus he is thrust into his newest adventure. He has committed no crime; rather Montorio has plans for him—and the means to ensure his cooperation.

The papacy is in a state of transition with ailing Pope Clement apparently on his deathbed and various factions already maneuvering to have their favorite elected to replace him. Montorio is intent that his brother, Cardinal Stefano, should be the next pope.

Since Lorenzo Fabiani, the Cardinal Padrone, who could decide the matter by supporting one faction or another, is a great music lover, Montorio has decided to make him "a present of Venice's finest singer," Tito Amato. Montorio expects Tito to act as a spy within Fabiani's household. Tito refuses, but Montorio, a skilled and ruthless plotter, produces a captive and battered Alessandro, and that gives Tito no choice but to accept the assignment in order to rescue his brother.

The murder of a young woman servant in Fabiani's household results in further complications when Tito realizes that he has been deliberately implicated. His is not an easy task, and he finds some unexpected help in the form of a lovely woman. (Readers who equate castrati with sexlessness will be surprised).

Myers sets the stage beautifully, and her Tito Amato is an endearingly sympathetic character whose company should be enjoyed for many more performances. A brief author's note at the end of the book enhances the excellent historical background of Tito's series.

Larry Karp fashions an entertaining mystery around the clouded flowering of ragtime music and the genius of Scott Joplin in Sedalia, Missouri, in the 1890s. As a Missourian by birth, I think of Sedalia as a sedate little town whose sole distinction is serving as the site of the State Fair. But Karp's *THE RAGTIME KID* (Poisoned Pen, \$24.95) transports readers to a Sedalia bursting with music and ambitions.

Hearing Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" for the first time and learning that Joplin lives in Sedalia plants the seed that leads a determined fifteen-year-old Brun Campbell to hop a train and run away from his home in El Reno, Oklahoma, and head for his Mecca in 1899.

Brun's piano playing skills and his go-getter attitude serve him well. He finds work in John Stark's music store and occasionally as a substitute piano player in some bars. He meets Joplin, auditions for him, and convinces him to take him on as a student (an unusual arrangement for a black man and a white boy at that time and place). He finds a home away from home with a kindly family, and becomes a key figure when unscrupulous men conspire to steal Joplin's music.

Filled with historical characters, Karp spins a credible murder mystery that serves to illuminate the genius of Scott Joplin and his struggle to control his music and have it taken as seriously as classical music. As part of the backdrop to the story, though, the pervasive racism of the time resulted in slights large and small, and Karp is unsparing in depicting its ravages.

A final chapter provides further historical underpinning for Karp's tale, and an extensive bibliography illustrates the author's determination to get it right.

Ken Kuhlken recalls the fertile ferment of the folk movement that flowed from flower power to protest and brought plenty of culture clashes in its wake in his sixth novel, *THE DO-RE-MI* (Poisoned Pen, \$24.95). This book features Clifford Hickey, the son of Tom Hickey, the PI who was introduced in Kuhlken's award-winning first novel, *The Loud Adios*, in 1991.

Clifford isn't a detective, but rather a musician who in a last fling before law school heads for Evergreen—a small coastal California town among the redwoods, where a folk jamboree is to

take place in the summer of 1972.

Clifford's brother, Alvaro, a Vietnam vet who's had some troubles since his return, is already living in the area and has ties to Phil Ochs, one of the jamboree headliners. Clifford has barely managed to find Alvaro's remote campsite and greet his brother when a delegation of sheriff's deputies arrive. Alvaro grabs a rifle and flees into the woods. The deputies grab Clifford and, to his amazement, charge him with conspiracy to commit murder.

Filled with hippies, bikers, protesters, drop-outs, and mystics, Kuhlken's story brings back the time when the peaceful folk scene of the sixties morphed into something altogether more strident and divisive, reflecting the same divisions that were gripping the country. Clifford is caught in some of the fallout as Evergreen's townspeople, biker gangs, and hippie communes clash violently.

Music, marijuana, and murder provide Clifford with more than he ever bargained for, but it's an entertaining farrago for the reader.

Internationally bestselling author Henning Mankell adds to his series of Kurt Wallander mysteries with a fourth installment, *THE MAN WHO SMILED* (The New Press, \$24.95), translated from Swedish by Laurie Thompson.

The story opens with Wallander on extended sick leave from the Ystad police force of Sweden, severely disquieted by having killed a man more than a year before. Wallander is on the brink of abandoning police work altogether when lawyer-friend Sten Torstensson begs his attention to his father's recent, and suspicious, death. At first glance, the death appears to be an ordinary car accident—an old man dead along a fog-blanketed road—but when Sten himself turns up dead two weeks later, expertly shot three times in the head and chest, Wallander returns to work and demands the case.

He's paired with Ann-Britt Höglund, Ystad's first female detective, who proves unexpectedly adroit for a rookie. The case is slow starting until a garden-planted land mine and a car bomb set them off on a lead in the investigation; for both the murder and the bombings, Wallander fingers the elusive business mogul who had become Tortensson's father's sole client for the past few years.

Mankell's easy writing style well accommodates the novel's sometimes-formidable plot; at times, the narrative gets mired in its rigorous descriptions of Wallander's deductive process, which may send even the keenest mystery reader's mind into a tailspin. But at the novel's finish, we are privileged to witness extraordinary insight, and the circumspect Detective Wallander is a character through which Mankell can realize canonical ambitions. —Nicole K. Sia

THE LIMNER'S MASTERPIECE

JANICE LAW

It was a damp day in late winter, fog hanging over river and wood, manure piles steaming, rain considering but holding off, and, even so, damp everywhere sinking into your bones. That kind of day. Still, the air was mild enough to make young men think of spring, and cows look out for new grass.

Anson Bigelow was in the back room of the smallest house in Attawaugan, preparing to hit the road for a summer traveling in the face painting trade. He was finishing up his stretchers and priming canvases with big dollops of white lead. Anson used only the best pigments from Boston on good Belgium linen, for he aimed at permanence, permanence and preservation being the whole point of a portrait. As for the likeness, he let his customers judge, and they were rarely disappointed.

That spring day, as Anson thought about the season to come, his spaniel, Daisy, bounded into the room, leaping and dancing to announce a stranger. When he looked out the window, Anson was surprised, and a little excited, to see Prince, Jeremiah Minton's big African butler, sitting like the King of the World on a white-faced plow horse. The painter hurried out, carrying his brush to indicate a serious busyness, though whatever he had in hand would mean less than nothing to Prince, whose manner was only a shade less grand than his master's.

"You're to come right away, Mr. Bigelow," Prince said, not even getting down, friendlylike. Then, remembering Anson's affliction, he beckoned for the painter to come to him.

"What's happened?" The painter's little-used voice was hoarse and loud. Prince closed up his face like a preacher before a hell-fire sermon.

"Not to intrude on the family's sorrow," Anson said, "but I'll need to prepare my mind for the work. And bring the right sized canvas."

Prince twisted his mouth half open before realizing the futility:



Anson Bigelow was stone deaf. The butler held his hands apart a foot, a foot and a half.

The painter nodded. So, an infant. He figured he'd bring two canvases, though price meant little to the Mintons, who would surely require the full infant size. "I'll pack my equipment," he said.

Prince got down at that and saw to his horse, which rolled its eyes white keeping track of the whip. Inside, Anson cleaned his brushes before selecting two of his best canvases, one right for a small child's head, shoulders, and arms, the other for the whole of a reclining infant, plus a fine pillow and a pretty rug, the comforts of the dead, such as he was well used to supplying. He loaded his cart with his paints, canvases, and easel, and Prince unbent enough to help hitch Meg, the chestnut mare, because time was of the essence, with that mild south wind blowing. When they were all set, Daisy jumped up beside Anson on the seat, and Prince put his horse to a trot.

The Mintons! Their portraits usually came from Boston or Philadelphia, and the magnitude of this professional opportunity made it hard for Anson to get into an appropriately somber frame of mind. The recording of the dead was an honor and a precious trust, and he tried to conduct himself accordingly, knowing that his work would gradually replace the bereaved's ever-shifting memories. Especially with children, painted images would prevail, and Anson did a lot of infants; youths too. Consumption, diphtheria, and fevers kept his business afloat; partial payment for the summer fever, followed by measles, that had taken his hearing and steered him to the limner's trade.

Still, mortuary portraits wouldn't have been his first choice; Anson preferred to do fancy pictures woven of his own imagination, but he had a gift for painting the departed, and there was an aptness about a silent painter for the silent dead. Not for him the gossip that endeared other itinerants, nor the sparkling repartee that charmed the ladies. He was, of necessity, a discreet painter, and the great silence within which he moved had instilled in Anson a salutary fear of the Lord. Jolting over dirt tracks just turning to mud in the lower places, Anson thought, as he so often did, about the mysterious workings of Providence, meditations interrupted today by thoughts of the fee he might command.

He did not like to take advantage of grief, but surely the Mintons would expect to pay something more than his usual. Ten dollars, Anson thought, maybe ten dollars would not be too much. He envisioned his work displayed to general admiration in the Minton's splendid parlor; he imagined new commissions, a rising

reputation, perhaps even a winter in Boston. These were idle and insubstantial hopes, yet Anson knew himself talented, a good craftsman, a perceptive eye. He was sure he could do something spectacular for the Mintons, who had been great lords in the old style before the Revolution, and who were still the chief family in the county.

There were some questions about just how they had remained when other Tories fled north or shipped out from Boston. Probably their slave militia had something to do with their tenure, and Anson gave a glance at Prince—the last relic of those glories. The other Africans had decamped to sloth and penury, but Prince had remained to become chief butler and factotum. Powerful positions. Old Minton and he ran a vast network of farms. Half the county was in debt to Minton, and the other half was hoping to borrow money.

Anson reminded himself that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God, and clucked to Meg, encouraging her up a gravelled drive. Ahead, on the brow of a hill, surrounded by elms and oaks, the family's big white house sprawled from the original planked cabin into a profusion of wings and lean-tos and porticos and façades.

Behind this building was a wide, muddy yard with a smoke-house, barns, stables, a woodshed, and root cellar. Poultry clucked underfoot and pigs strolled nonchalant. A pack of large, fierce dogs tore up, startling Daisy and setting Meg bucking and kicking until Prince laid about with his whip. In the wake of the dogs' retreat came a tall, straight youth to take the horse's reins.

He had brilliant blue eyes and a perfect Grecian profile Anson itched to sketch. Then the lad turned. The whole left side of his face had been laid open, slashed as with a knife or a whip, and one of the beautiful eyes, swollen shut. Anson had trouble concealing his shock, and he couldn't help noticing that the groom flinched when Prince scowled. At the stable door, Anson tied Meg to the post and asked the groom to look after the dog. Then, burdened with his equipment, he followed the formidable butler across the stone flags of the kitchen floor and the imported tiles in the hallway, past the gleaming floors and fine rugs of the parlor to a small office smelling of wood smoke and tobacco.

The walls were lined with shelves of ledgers, and the desk was covered with papers and bills. Jeremiah Minton didn't rouse himself until Prince announced a visitor; then the old man looked Anson up and down and pursed his heavy lips, as if the offering did not suit his price. Minton had a lot of gray hair, worn long in

the fashion of a generation before, and a deal of dirty linen. His eyes were dark, his brows heavy, his skin chapped and wind-burned, his expression forbidding.

"I am sorry for your loss," Anson said. "May the Lord comfort you and your family."

Minton waved his hand. "A picture. How much?"

Anson understood. He held up the two canvases, took a breath, and greatly daring, said, "Seven and a half for the small, ten for the large."

Minton gave a hoarse laugh and pointed to the larger canvas; from his contemptuous expression, Anson guessed that he might have asked a good deal more.

The old man stood up, heavy and a bit stiff in one leg. Anson followed him to a chilly north room where a child lay in its cradle. The baby was perfectly formed, perhaps five or six months old, with golden hair and pretty little hands. Anson remembered that Minton's young wife was said to be a beauty. Certainly the child didn't betray any of the coarseness of its sire, for even in death, which sinks and collapses, the face was lovely. Anson felt a pang and also a slight excitement: He could already see a wonderful picture.

"May God bless this child." Anson realized he did not know if it was a boy or a girl, but he thought a boy, the long sought heir, now lost, hence the picture. "The name?"

Minton gave him a fierce, evil look and shook his head. "What do you need a name for? You're painting him, not writing him."

Understanding that he was to be told nothing, Anson opened up his easel and laid down a scrap of old cloth to protect the floor. He put up his canvas, took out a stick of charcoal, and hesitated.

"What is it, man?" Minton demanded, impatient; it seemed, at the smallest delay.

"Something for the child to hold? It makes a better picture. A toy, some favorite thing, even a blanket. Perhaps your good wife might have just the item? Mothers often—"

Before he could finish, Minton twisted up his face as if in rage and laughed, revealing missing teeth, darkened molars, and a thick maroon tongue. "A good idea," Minton said and clapped Anson on the shoulder.

The painter could not help shrinking. The instant he felt Minton's touch, Anson saw the handsome stableman with his mutilated face, and the savage dogs, and the white eyes of the nervous plow horse.

"I'll ask the lady myself," Minton said. "Get to work." He gestured as if holding a brush.

Anson bowed slightly and began laying out the design with his

charcoal. He would have to work quickly. He'd outline the child's body first to set up the design, then make some sketches of the face. He figured he'd have no more than a day, and even if he had longer, the child, the essence of the child, already so much diminished, would weaken further. He must be quick if he was to catch whatever was left, whatever would suggest the spirit now departed.

For the rest, the blankets, the toy, the embroidered trim on the gown, these could be filled in later, using a doll or a few pillows to supply the place of the body. The finishing glazes and touches that bring a painting to life could be added at his leisure; here, if the Mintons pleased, or in his own shop. But all that was nothing to the matter at hand, which was the precise proportion of the head to the body, of the hands to the arms. Anson went over and raised the child's head a little with the pillow. Then he drew his stool nearer to the cradle and began the lines of the head.

How difficult infants are! How large the forehead, how small the features; yet the eyes are large, even in death. Anson was distracted for an instant by the question of the color of the child's eyes, not that it could matter for this picture, which would show the infant asleep, asleep in the bosom of Abraham. Sometimes parents wanted the deceased depicted as if alive—a tricky matter. But there was no need in this case to wonder, to worry about its eyes. No, no, he must concentrate on the difficult line of the lids, it being so easy to make children either look ancient or doll-like. This painting would be perfect, all the lines exact: the nose softly curving, the lips neatly formed and meeting gently the plump line of the cheek, the tiny perfections of the hands and nails. Oh yes, he could do it.

Several hours passed before a little servant, no more than a child herself, brought him cider and some bread and cheese. Anson hated to leave his easel, but believing it disrespectful to eat in front of his sad subject, he went out to the yard and shared his lunch with Daisy. When he was finished, he returned the tankard to the kitchen and headed eagerly back to work. The design was good. He had stepped back as far as the doorway and covered one eye and held up his little black mirror, and each check showed that all was harmonious. As for his sketch of the head, Anson was hopeful but unsure. You could get too close to your work, lose the perspective. It was good to take a break and come back with fresh eyes.

He was thinking of those things, of all that could go wrong or right, when, confused by the network of passages and doorways, he entered a bare little parlor. He was over the threshold before he realized there was no cradle, no easel, no painting stool.

Instead, a woman with golden hair, dressed in deep mourning, sat weeping in a violet slipper chair. Anson had an impression of damaged youth and beauty: the mother, of course. This had to be Mrs. Minton.

He colored with embarrassment. "Forgive me," he said. "I am so sorry. And for the child, too, so very sorry." He wanted to tell her that he would paint her a worthy memento, but cheeks wet, nose running, eyes wild, she was up and past him in a flash. She disappeared down the corridor, and Anson hesitated nervously at each doorway until he found the one with his easel and his subject. He noticed that a carved bluebird now lay at the foot of the cradle, and a beautiful little quilt covered the infant's feet.

Anson was delighted with these additions and immediately took up his sketch, but it was several minutes before he could make himself concentrate. He could not have said why he felt so shaken. Awkward, of course, to blunder in on her grief, but it was not just that. She seemed so young and pretty, and her husband! But Anson knew he must not let his thoughts slide in that direction. The best he could do for her was a fine portrait, a beautiful, consoling painting. How often had he received little notes saying that his work provided a precious memento: *Such a comfort, Mr. Bigelow, I find it such a comfort*, words that made up for sketches done in cold or—worse yet—hot rooms, for proximity to death and suffering.

And truly, the Minton infant was an exceptional subject. Such elegant lines, such perfect skin. So often there was evidence of disease, of wasting, of whatever vile fate had terminated life—not here. Anson wondered how the child had died, and so recently too. There was still, he fancied, the faintest flush on the cheek. Imagination, of course, yet he thought he would be able to catch the skin color if he worked quickly, if he made color notes right away. There was so much to do, so much to *see*, that Anson was soon absorbed in his work. The light was almost entirely gone, and he was about to fetch a lamp, when the same little servant girl came to summon him to dinner.

Usually, Anson was an honored guest at the family table. The backwoods farmers, who were the bulk of his trade, never stood on ceremony, but townsfolk and merchants welcomed him too, despite his handicap and his lack of conversation. Mothers always treated him kindly, urging more biscuits and preserves, as if his art required their special recipes and jams. So he might have taken umbrage at the directive to eat in the kitchen. Indeed, sitting between Prince and the mutilated groom would have been dreadful. But the butler, resplendent in evening dress, served in the din-

ing room, and Anson thought that to eat with ferocious Old Minton and his grieving consort would be more dreadful yet.

Considering that prospect, Anson found the big, warm kitchen perfectly acceptable. He smiled at the little servant girl, nodded to the cook and scullery maid, and kept himself to the right side of the groom, whose undamaged profile would have tempted a Phidias. Anson was glad to see the cook treat the boy kindly and noticed that the scullery maid gave him the best of the meat. Perhaps, Anson thought, his apprehension of violence was an error. More likely an accident or some youthful carelessness was behind those fresh and appalling wounds, and he kept his eyes on his dinner. He would have no time to draw the boy in any case, though his face was haunting and his eyes amazing.

When the meal was finished, Anson asked for a light to work on his picture, but the cook let him know by gestures that the child must be confined that night. The little servant girl was dispatched to help move his equipment and to show him the room on the top floor where he was to sleep. It had a good window, Anson noticed, and a lamp. The girl left her candle as well, and once he'd fetched his dog, the painter had the comforts of home and could begin laying in his colors. The fine flesh tints and the creams and whites of the linen must wait for daylight.

Anson Bigelow worked for three days at the Mintons, laboring to bring the portrait to perfection. When he was done, two days after the Minton infant had been buried in the fenced plot beyond the gardens, Anson surveyed his picture with pride. The faint red of the ground he used was echoed in the red tints of the quilt and in the rosy designs on the bluebird. He thought the bird was, perhaps, the color of the child's closed eyes, and he painted it clasped to the breast. The embroidery on the white gown, the cream color of the blanket—yes, he'd caught those—and above all, the face, the enchanting sweetness of its beauty. Suffer the little children to come unto me, Anson thought, a text followed immediately in his mind by, whoso offend one of these little ones . . . How apt the Bible was on all occasions, how apt, and, occasionally, how troubling.

The picture must now dry well, but he promised Prince that he would return in mid summer to varnish it. There was some delay at this, as Prince knew little of painting, and Old Minton never deigned another interview, but eventually, Anson received his fee and signed the picture. He would have liked to design the frame, knowing that dark greenish blue with just a touch of gilt would be perfect, but the Mintons patronized a Boston firm and would not hear of any alternative.

Anson would also have liked to speak with the sorrowing Mrs. Minton. He longed to assure her that he'd given his very best work, that she would not have gotten better in Boston, that—and this would have been quite unprofessional and inappropriate—she was beautiful, that he would pray for her happiness. Anson flushed a little just to think of the follies he might have committed in even the briefest interview, but it seemed to him that she was desperately in need of the consolation of his beautiful painting.

He had his equipment packed, the cart loaded, and Meg hitched with Daisy standing guard. Anson took a last look around his room, picked up his coat, unneeded on this day of sunshine, and walked downstairs. He was meaning to thank the cook and the little servant girl, who had kept his lamp topped up and had washed one of his shirts, when he passed the parlor. Old Minton and his wife were there, and though Anson could not hear their voices, he spotted the portrait. There was something about the dark harmony of reds and greens against the child's pale and flawless skin that was very satisfying. The features were good too; the baby might have been asleep in its cradle, dreaming of puppies and kittens and his mother's smile. Yes, it looked fine, propped up in the place of honor on the mantel. This compliment to his skill gave Anson the confidence to step into the parlor and make his bow.

Old Minton gestured toward the painting and inclined his head to Anson. "A fine job, Mr. Bigelow. A useful item." He turned to his wife, who, white faced, clutched a handkerchief to her mouth: "Don't you agree, my dear?"

"I can't bear to look at it," she cried, turning as if to flee. In that gesture, Anson understood that flight was her natural mode, that she was a bird of passage unluckily made captive.

Her husband grabbed her arm. "You'll look at it every day of your life," he shouted. "You'll see it until the day you die." His face was terrible; his wrath, like a lion in the room. "Get out, Mr. Bigelow."

Anson understood only trouble and anger. With a sense of helplessness, he looked at her wild face and, greatly daring, said, "I will remember your grief."

Their eyes met for an instant, then he bowed again. Into the corridor with its fine tiles and its painted trim, through the kitchen, where he made awkward, distracted farewells, out to the gaiety of the almost spring sunshine that mocked human sorrows. Anson Bigelow had given the Mintons his masterpiece, but he feared it would not bring them consolation. ♣

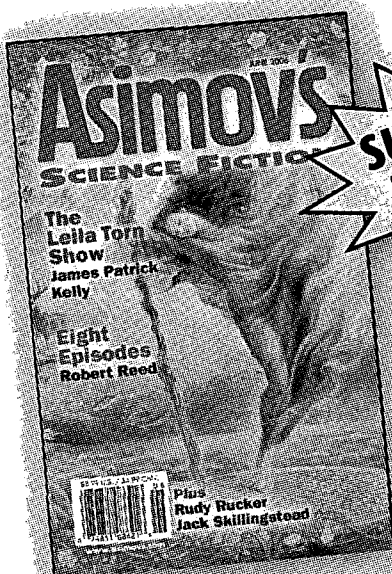
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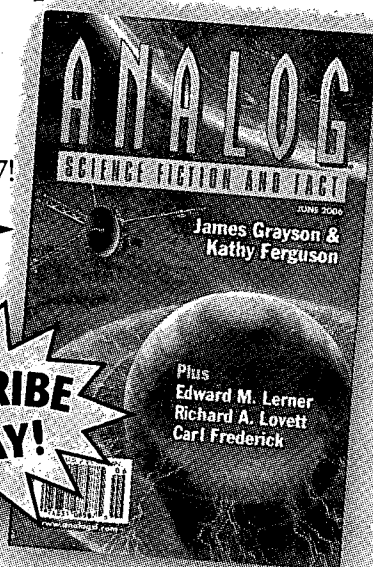
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EMERALDS? OH, THOSE EMERALDS

DAN CRAWFORD

The open plain tricked the eyes, with hope and a setting sun to help it. Polijn stepped to the right, snow crunching underfoot, expecting the shadows to show themselves no more than distant mountains or thicker clumps of cloud. Horizon and shadows did not shift together, though. They had to be houses—not many, perhaps, but the largest indication since morning that humanity still existed. She marched toward them, her shuffle and crunch cheerier than they had been for hours.

Since the last outbuilding of the count's stone home had disappeared behind her, there had been no landmarks at all to show whether she'd come miles or inches. The spread of midwinter white had been utterly uninterrupted. Not a tree to lean against nor a rock to offer shelter. Yet the journey had not been unpleasant in its silence. The air had stayed clear, nothing dripped from it. No wind had tried to force a way in among her scarves. Polijn had had the whole day to herself and had enjoyed it, except for her conviction that if it went on much longer, her toes would start to freeze. She believed in rationing one's indulgences. An excess of solitude had drawbacks, particularly when provisions were down to a lump of cheese and a heel of bread and only enough kindling to keep a small fire going in the open air for one night.

The promising dark lumps grew little by little. She slid the black scarf higher on her cheeks, feeling no difference. Her clothes had been warm enough for the first five or six hours, but she had gotten colder and colder as frigid air mixed with fatigue and frustration.

Her parting from the count had been friendly, if not optimistic. His home was snug and dry, with plenty of fireplaces and loud, friendly people. Provisions began to run low even before Midwinter. Polijn and a couple of other minstrels who had come

for the Midwinter festivities had found out for him who was secretly selling off the food stores, but arresting the miscreant wouldn't bring the provisions back. So the count thanked everyone and announced he could no longer risk feeding so many travelers when his own household needed to be provided for.

Polijn and twelve others elected to leave the place, drawing straws for the direction they would take. The harvest had been bad for miles around, and a group that large would be stoned away from any village. They'd have better chances moving singly through the winter wastes.

The count had been generous where he could: He had kindling, blankets, shawls, and scarves for the departing guests. In addition, Polijn had received a thick vest from the young lady whose fiancé Polijn had fingered for the crime, and some very good gloves from the young guard the lady would probably marry instead. These prepared her in more ways than one: If the folk in the cottages ahead had no need for Midwinter songs, they might take the gloves or a blanket in exchange for a meal, or a spot by the fire.

Fire? Her steps slowed. There was no smoke rising from the shadows ahead of her. She peered at the darkening sky and picked up her pace again. There was smoke. No, there wasn't. She moved faster and faster and then, drawing air again through the sodden fabric of the scarf, ordered herself to a reasonable pace. Falling facedown into the white blanket at her feet wouldn't warm her.

She stood among them at last, her nose wrinkling against the scarf. An old and neglected circle of stones rose above her, more stones at their feet, just humps in the snow at this point. Too cold for disappointment, she appraised their usefulness. There was some shelter here, of course, but she'd never found standing stones good to linger near after dark. For one thing, they had always seemed colder than other stones.

She set a gloved hand against the nearest one, wondering if any sort of curse lingering on them might explain the lack of houses in this part of the world. She felt nothing at all, though whether that was because of a lack of any spiritual presence or the lack of feeling in her hands, she couldn't have said. Turning slowly, she thought of previous other stone circles and what they might tell her about what to do and where to go from here. The circle was small and not as high as others. One stone was separated from the group, yards off in a direction Polijn believed to be north.

She started for the loner. It might well be a memorial stone to tell her why this circle stood here, or better, a milestone, showing the way to a town or religious community.

Her head tipped back. Dusk and disappointment had fooled her

this time. There had been smoke, and this was no stone, but a rugged hut like the ones shepherds used in the summer. In summer, this was probably a pleasant enough meadow. A shepherd's hut argued a town somewhere, but somewhere not too close. And who would be using it at this time of year? And cooking stew in it, if the air was to be believed.

Her feet were moving faster even as she considered her options. This might be a gang of bandits, or a group of travelers also caught out at Midwinter, with no other place to celebrate. There could easily be danger behind the door. Definite danger waited, though, if she spent the night out here. Her gloved fist thudded against the wood.

There was a scuffle inside. "Eat the map! Eat the map!" came a hoarse whisper.

"You just drew it in the dust on the table!"

"Well, lick the table then!"

Polijn thumped the door again and was raising a second fist to reinforce the first, when the door swung open. She had not realized just how cold she was until the warmth of the little fire hit her like a blast of summer.

A tall man with shaggy gray hair stood in the doorway. Beyond him were two shorter men, red cheeked, red beaked. More important, beyond these two was a fire with a pot over it and a jug near it.

"Good evening," the tall man said, his voice forced into casualness. "How may I help you?"

"How may I help *you*?" Polijn replied, easing to his left and taking a sideways step toward the fire. "Is there a song you'd like to hear to add cheer to your Midwinter celebrations?"

"Ah!" said the shortest of the men. "Do you know the one with the . . ."

"We're rather busy tonight," the man at the door interjected, pushing one leg in Polijn's path.

The leg was by no means big enough to fill the available space, and Polijn was around it in a moment. "An evening of song would cost no more than a bit of stew and a corner of the floor."

The two men inside were already moving to make room by the fire, the shorter of the two patting the top of a broad wooden chest near the jug. The tall man's face was one of impatience. "We have hardly enough for . . ." He took his eyes from Polijn and looked out at the cold night. "I say, are you alone?"

This was one of the questions Polijn didn't like to hear when she was alone. She shrugged. "I'm meeting some people at the crossroads tomorrow." There had to be a crossroads under the snow someplace.

The tall man blinked and then pushed the door shut. His face was suddenly broad, open, honest, sympathetic, and hiding something.

"Do come in, come in! We're a bit busy right now, just a little job to do before we serve out the stew, but there's always room, always room." His hand thumped down on Polijn's shoulder. "Here's someone we were waiting for, chaps!"

The other two men looked at him "Were we? Who is it, then?" demanded the cleaner one.

"A volunteer!" The hand thumped on her shoulder in congratulation.

This was another of those things Polijn didn't like to hear, but she was checking the pain in her fingers and toes. She hurt in every one. Good. That meant they were all still attached.

"A volunteer?" demanded the shortest man.

"And just in time too!" The tall man, who was evidently the leader of the little group, rubbed his hands together. "You lads bring the . . . blankets."

"Blankets?" demanded both.

He scowled. "Blankets! And bring the map."

"I just licked up the map!" cried the shortest man.

"He can bring his tongue," the middle man suggested, taking a scarf off the top of a big box.

"That I wish he'd leave behind," muttered the leader, taking a coil of rope. The other men, not overly enthusiastic about it, each took an end of the big wooden box. "Are we ready, then?" the tall man asked.

"Not for a minute," said the middle man. "Only an idiot would go out in the cold on a night like this."

"It's right nasty out there!" agreed the shortest, letting his end of the box drop to the floor.

The tall man shrugged the coil of rope up to his shoulder. "Nonsense! It's perfect weather—" A loop of rope slid down his arm. He snatched at it, and three more loops followed it. "—for pitting our wits—" The rest of the rope fell, and he picked it up as a bundle instead of a coil. "—against the riddles of the ages."

"It's perfect weather for curling up with a good drink," the short man told him.

"We could all stand a nice warm drink . . ." The middle man began.

"Now, don't you start!" The leader turned to Polijn, who stood with her back to the fire and had hoped they'd argue for a while longer. "What about you? Are you, at least, ready for an adventure men will sing about for years to come?"

"I'm ready for a nap," the middle man put in. "Naps are more my line."

"Oh, ignore them," the leader snapped. "They're just here to carry the . . . blankets." He wound the rope around itself and tied a knot. "Now you're here, we have everything we need. I told you my plan would work."

"You were expecting a volunteer?" inquired the middle man.

His nose and eyebrows rose in imperial affront. "And why not?"

"In the snow?" snapped the shortest man, arms folded. "On the longest night of the year? And the coldest?"

The leader shook a finger at them. "It's just that kind of negative thinking that spells failure." The tall man flung the door open; winter had never seemed less inviting. "Come, lads!" A long arm reached out to catch Polijn by the shoulder again as the bundle of rope came untied and flopped to the floor. "Don't be afraid of the snow; it's going to make us rich. On Midwinter night it is possible to summon the spirit of Tewayn the Red and ask where he hid his treasure. Bring the torch as well."

Polijn looked up at him, too startled to resist as he pulled her toward the door. Even in her hometown, where the best of the evening's tales were always about legendary outlaws, Tewayn the Red was something special in the way of murder and plunder. "Do you think he'll tell you?"

The man shrugged. "After a thousand years he should realize he doesn't need it."

"Nothing to buy down there," the shortest man agreed, nodding toward the door.

"Dozens of people have tried it and not come back," the middle man pointed out, his face one of resignation as he lifted the box once more.

Polijn was outside in the snow again, the tall man not far behind her. "Ah, but they didn't approach the question with a logical mind. We'll do better; once he sees what sort of brain he's dealing with, he'll be glad to see the treasure is in my good hands. Ha-ha!"

"Ha-ha!" growled the short man, taking up his end of the big box.

The leader urged Polijn ahead of him toward the circle of standing stones. "I hope it's not too cold down there," murmured the middle man, behind them.

"Oh, we won't be long," the tall man told them.

"Nobody else has ever come out." The middle-sized man rubbed his nose with a gloved hand. "I know I have to be buried one day, but I was thinking of someplace a bit warmer."

The leader's hands fluttered in the air. "Oh, what heroes! Always

putting a brave face on things!" The tall man was taking them to one of the long horizontal lumps of snow. "Remember! You're in the hands of an organizing genius!"

Polijn considered the circle with new interest. So this was the tomb of Tewayn the Red. Her eyes went left and right, scanning for danger and historic notes. She could possibly outrun these three, even on thawed and refrozen toes, but it would take a while, since there was no place handy to hide. And if staying might give her a good song about Tewayn the Red, the investment of a moment or two of discomfort might be worth it.

The leader took up a stance before an oblong lump of snow that looked very much like the rest of them. Setting his feet shoulder width apart and squaring his shoulders so all three spectators knew he was doing it, he reached into a pouch at his belt and threw out a handful of something that made the two men sneeze. "Kazinga!"

"The same to you too!" noted the small man, letting down the box and sitting on it.

The tall man's head swung back, nostrils flared. "Kasilta!" he bel-lowed, throwing something white now.

"Could we go inside and wait while you recite the names of all your old girlfriends?" inquired the middle man.

"Be quiet, the pair of you! This is going to—" He whirled, eyes wide, as stone grated on stone.

The foursome watched silently, in varying degrees of amazement, as a long patch of snow moved, dropping away into a dark hole. Polijn, leaning in, could see the top step of a long flight of stone stairs.

"No lights," noted the middle man. "Maybe he's not in."

"Very good, very good." The tall man rubbed his hands together, glee suffusing his chilled features. "Bring the torch now, friend. Step lively. We don't know how much time we'll have. You two lads, watch your step. Those . . . blankets are heavy. Let's be getting on."

The middle man rubbed a chilly nose. "I just got my footprints warm right here."

"And I was looking for a rose to carry with me," said the short man. "For luck, don't you know?"

"There won't be any roses for six months," said the leader, frowning.

"I'll wait."

"Oh, come now!" The tall man threw his hands in the air. "Are we all suddenly allergic to money?" He turned to Polijn. "Come, you'll go, won't you, friend? Take the torch. Show these two the

way. I'll, er, just sweep some of this snow off so it doesn't fall in after us and makes the steps slippery when we're carrying treasure out."

Polijn looked from him to his two embarrassed companions and shrugged. She'd never find out what this was all about unless she started down. If there was something waiting, she could come back up, and if it was a trick, surely she could outwit this trio. She took the torch, nodded to the others, and stepped down into the opening. She heard grumbling as the box of "blankets" was lifted.

No treasure was immediately revealed to her as she moved down. The stairs took her to a cold stone room, long and low. She had rather been expecting a sarcophagus, or a niche with a body in it. There were several niches and several rows of bodies, many of them skeletal. Some of these sat in niches, but most were shoulder to shoulder on long stone benches. A few nearby had either frozen solid or been mummified underground.

"Oh, I do like this," said the middle man, his voice showing no such satisfaction. "I see Tewayn could afford to have the decorators in."

"He did know how to make a body feel welcome," said the short man, stamping his feet.

"No worse than a council meeting." The tall man slapped his hands together, both to generate enthusiasm and to thaw them. "This shows we're on the right track, doesn't it? These must be the unwary looters who came around without thinking the thing through properly. Let's get a look up front."

He hurried Polijn and the torch past the rows of corpses. "It's just as I imagined it."

"Except for the piles of gold," said the small man. "Where are these buckets of rubies we're on about?"

"If everything were piled in the most convenient spots," said the leader, taking the torch from Polijn's hand and sticking it into an old bracket high in the stone, "the treasure would be long gone. We'd find nothing."

"Which we did find," the middle man pointed out. "Let's go see if the stew is done, shall we?"

"Nonsense. The spell worked, so this must be where we can ask Tewayn about the treasure."

Polijn looked around the tomb, making mental notes for a song as well as considering her chances. The chamber was just narrow enough for two men shoulder to shoulder to block any fast exits. One of them, catching her gaze, realized what she was thinking and shrugged in an apologetic way.

A flash made her turn back to the leader. He was sighting along

the bright blade of a long, curved knife, his face one of doubt. He glanced down in her direction and saw her eyes on him. He nodded to her.

"Well, now we come to the nitty-gritty, my friend, but think of the advantages! You'll be at no expense for a funeral when you're already underground."

"Quite a bargain, really," said the middle man, in a doleful tone.

"Oh yes," said the small man, brightly. "Dead cheap." He winced as his foot was stepped upon.

Polijn took a step away from the leader. "We felt we should go through a bit of a ritual to get Tewayn in a good mood. And a human sacrifice seemed the likeliest bet."

"I was all for a ritual snowball fight," sighed the middle man.

Polijn studied the pointed knife with affable interest. "Have you tried everything else first?" she inquired, her voice one of purely detached curiosity. "After all, in any circle of standing stones, the treasure is buried under the third one left from due north."

"Is it?" demanded the small man.

"Oh, always." She nodded at them. "There's the story of the treasure of Sporus and how Birulph turned it up on the eve of battle. And you'll remember Arrinshah's adventures and how he spent the treasure he found on the barmaids of Stilth." She continued to nod until the men nodded back their familiarity with these ancient legends she had just made up.

"Knows a lot about it, she does," the small man told the leader.

"We could try it," agreed the middle man. "And come back to this later."

The tall man looked from them to the knife, his expression changing from one of indecision to one of acute apathy as he considered the killing.

"It's possible this is true," he said. His voice rose in volume. "Still, after all, the man who buried the treasure will have more expert knowledge. We can try the sacrifice first and then dig under the third stone."

"Are you sure he wants a sacrifice?" Polijn inquired. "If you offend him, his vengeance could be terrible. There's the song of the tomb raider of . . ."

The tall man shook his head. "Come! We must get down to business. Tomb and toad wait for no moon. If we don't hurry we may be in jeopardy. I see your side of it, friend, but we have a lot of money at stake. We won't forget you. We'll be able to afford to bring you flowers every year."

"Up on top, of course," said the middle man, stamping his feet against the chill. "I see no reason to keep coming down here."

Polijn wondered whether, if she ran at them, they would really try to stop her. The leader sighed. "I probably should have killed you back there on the stairs, and you never would have had to worry about it. But I hesitated."

"Yes," said the middle man. "Human sacrifice isn't something you want to rush into."

"Actually, it's just the sort of thing you should rush into," said the leader, whetting the knife a bit on his belt. "But I wondered whether you should be dead when Tewayn appears, or whether he wouldn't enjoy watching."

"Why don't we wait until he appears and ask him?" Polijn inquired, taking one more step away.

"But he might not appear without the sacrifice!" The knife flashed again as the tall man threw his hands into the air. "How long would we wait to find out if he's coming?"

"Spring?" inquired the short man.

"Spring works for me," said his companion, with a nod.

"If we wait too long and the moon shifts before he appears, we'll have wasted the whole enterprise!"

"We could do it next Midwinter then," said the short man, kicking his boots against the nearest stone. "Or never."

"Never works for me too," noted the middle man.

The tall man took three steps forward, actually passing Polijn, who set her back to the frigid stone wall. "Think of the money! You'd never have to work again!"

"He doesn't work now," the middle man said.

The big man's eyes rolled. "You'd never have to borrow again!"

"Wealth certainly takes the sport out of life," growled the short man.

"Let's get hold of ourselves!" The tall man whirled and actually got hold of Polijn's shoulder. Polijn froze; this would be the wrong time to make a hasty move. The knife could swing down at any point in the procedure.

"All we need to do now is decide where to do it." Taking her with him as if he intended to consult her to the end, he marched back to the bracket and torch, from where Polijn could gaze into the eyes of all the dead men on the benches. "We can't afford to make mistakes here. Everything must be planned to the last ..."

His foot caught against that of one of the corpses. Polijn had to leap back from the knifepoint.

"That nearly solved the problem," noted the small man, as the leader righted himself.

"One of them, anyway," said the middle man.

"What'll you say when he does appear?" Polijn inquired.

"Especially if he's angry that you've profaned his tomb?"

"Oh, I have a speech all prepared," he assured her.

"Oh, that's marvelous. One of your lectures will put him in a fine generous mood," said the small man.

"Tewayn might give us the money just to get him to go away."

"Give you money?"

There were suddenly five in the room. The newcomer was a pale creature with hair almost red and eyes almost hazel. His cheeks were high and hollow, and his faintly pink lips wore the possibility of a smile without the smile itself.

"Ai!" said the small man.

"Oh!" the middle man cried, his eyes as big as his partner's feet.

"Ab ab ab," said the leader, being more articulate. The curved knife came up.

The only way to keep from being sacrificed prematurely was to take charge. "Sir!" Polijn exclaimed, stepping toward the visitant. "We were praying that you might tell us some of your adventures hiding your treasure!"

"Prayer's changed since I was up there," noted the ghost, eyeing the chest and the curved knife.

"Everyone knows of your daring at robbery." Polijn bowed to the spirit. "But the job of hiding the loot must have been fraught with dangers as well, to be overcome by sheer ingenuity."

The ghost's eyes were so bright now they seemed to spring from his face, and the smile was real. "Just so, young friend, just so. If you're not thinking every minute, a barrel of emeralds can be no end of trouble."

Tewayn's voice seemed quite high for someone who had been underground so long. Polijn's companions were more impressed by the words, though.

"A barrel of emeralds!"

"I'd take a cask of hot rum instead right now," Tewayn said.

The tall man decided to assert his leadership. "We've, er, brought a person to sacrifice in your honor." He took two steps toward Polijn.

The ghost rubbed a spectral chin. "Oh, that would be nice. They did a sacrifice to me up here once."

Polijn ducked as the tall man's hand came for her shoulder again. They both froze as the ghost said, "However . . ."

Tewayn was pointing to the stairs. "That bench at the back is handier, really, if you need elbow room."

The tall man snatched at Polijn's sleeve and missed. She slid down one of the rows of corpses, avoiding feet in an effort to get a wall of bodies between herself and any pursuers.

Tewayn paid no attention. "That's where we repackaged the pearls, you know. Twelve casks of pearls and one broke. If I told them once, I told them— Is that a pearl there? No, that's a toe bone, isn't it?"

It was. "You must have eaten some oysters in your time!" the small man said. "Where did you get twelve casks of pearls?"

"Better yet," said Polijn, pulling away as the tall man came around a bench, "where did you put eleven casks of pearls?" If she could get one hint out of him, it would show they didn't need a sacrifice.

"Why don't we take care of . . ." The tall man had realized where his advantage lay and reached over a couple of frozen men to repossess her shoulder.

"Sir, how did they carry the casks for you? One under each arm?" Polijn ducked her head, but toward the man, so she could keep track of that knife.

"What? Oh, no, no, no. The casks were far too large. They had to take one apiece."

The tall man kept his grip on Polijn's shoulder but turned to gaze at the ghost; his own eyes lighting up. "And no one has found them? In all this time?"

"Seen anybody buying a kingdom lately?" Tewayn demanded with scorn. "Making a collection of mountains? Then no one's found it."

The tall man was breathing heavier. Polijn, watching the knife, felt breathless herself. By no means taking her eyes off him, she reached around to her pack. "I must write all this down for a song."

The ghost nodded to the others. "I like your friend." He waved a semitransparent hand around the room. These other fellows had no interest at all in historical matters. It was all about the money.

"And they bollixed that up as well," noted the small man.

Tewayn frowned. "How so?"

The man pointed at a skeleton. "No pockets."

The ghost laughed a rather high, screeching "hee hee hee." Polijn found it hard to square him with the legends of "He Who Eats Gold." One song said of him that he had cut off a thousand fingers and two hundred ears for the rings they bore and then a thousand toes just to have something to pack into the boxes so the rings wouldn't rattle. She glanced again at the knife, which was down at the tall man's belt just now.

"Are the pearls still there?" the leader demanded. "Where you put them?"

"Oh yes." The ghost moved under the torch, which made him seem more solid somehow. "I'd know, else. And anyway, you can't

get the staff these days. Where would you find men with the stamina to carry off all sixteen solid gold rabbit hutches?"

"Yes, where?" the small man demanded.

The tall man shoved the knife back into the hidden scabbard in his coat. "Oh, a few pounds of treasure won't be any trouble."

"He's talking about mountains of treasure," the small man pointed out.

The leader clapped Polijn on the shoulder. "There, you see? No security problems. No one could run off with so much."

"And what will you be carrying, oh mighty leader?" said the small man, nose wrinkling.

The tall man turned again to Tewayn. "And you're sure it's still where you left all the treasure?"

"I am a master of deceit and concealment, sir," the ghost informed him, with a raised nose.

"Like the tax collector," said the middle man, clapping his hands to restore circulation.

"Thank you, thank you!" The ghost nodded. "When people show respect, it can make all the difference. Remember King Bershett and the wedding at Ewes? He never noticed when we took all the presents, all the plates, and eleven of the bride's sisters."

"Eleven?" Polijn inquired.

"The twelfth had a limp and couldn't keep up." The ghost moved away from the torch, becoming translucent again. "Then we went up to where the king's favorite dancer was getting ready to perform. All she wore was the Ruby of Osauri, and at that, it wasn't the reddest or most valuable thing we saw."

The smallest man pushed a skeleton aside to sit and listen. "Tell us more. Did she . . . ow!" He rose a bit from the seat.

"Cold?" inquired Tewayn.

The leader stalked over to lift the man by the collar. "No, he's just alarmed at sitting down in the presence of such a mighty thief. And the treasure is all still where you put it?"

"I'd know, I tell you. I have senses like a soaring falcon, alert to every movement." He shook both hands at them. "You have to be on top of every detail when you're hiding treasure like that. Oh, the men thought we'd just tuck it into one of the graves at the burial ground near the lake, but I told them. Oh, I told them. The spring floods would have washed off the topsoil, and then where's your treasure?"

"So nothing's there?" inquired the leader. Disappointment in his voice said he'd had that spot in mind.

"Well, we never found the two gold swords again. But I suppose someone else has since." Tewayn shook his head. "Spring flood. Oh

dear, oh dear. You need to think. A silver cow and six golden pigs can't be hidden on a rooftop, you know."

The tall man let go of his short companion and sat in the spot the other had vacated, wincing a bit but asking, eagerly, "Six golden pigs?"

The small man muttered something about seat hogs, but Polijn was listening to what seemed to be the grating of stone on stone. She backed toward the stairs. There was only one man to pass.

Her back thudded against his chest. Polijn raised her shoulders.

But instead of taking any action against her, the middle man merely tugged at the front of his cap, said "Excuse me," and moved past her to the bench. The small man had knocked over another skeleton in sitting down, and this had made another seat available.

"And the treasure is still there," said the tall man, who liked to have his information confirmed.

"With those slabs of gold holding it down?" demanded Tewayn, head high. "It took all my men just to move one at a time." The treasure hunter's breath came in short, quick clouds in the cold air.

"I'll, uh, just step up for a moment," murmured Polijn. She glanced toward the stairs, hoping to see a bit of sky, but they were too steep. "No offense meant, but I think . . ."

"None taken." Tewayn waved a hand at her. "I remember the calls of nature, though I can't feel 'em anymore. Had to plan for that as well, or we'd never have gotten those ivory mice past the Cat Creature. It was when Jareth had to . . ."

Polijn shot up the stairs using both hands and feet, hoping there'd still be enough open space to squeeze through. Her head hit the capstone with enough force to make her grateful for all her scarves.

She moved back a couple of steps and glared at the stone barrier, her mind on those rows of frigid men. Then she eased up slowly, feeling the wall. At a space where it was a bit rough, she braced her hip and shoulder and reached up to try to force a way out. Taking a deep breath of the tomb's air, she shoved at the stone with all the force of shoulders, back, and thighs.

Spitting snow from her lips, she picked herself out of the imprint of her body she'd made in the landscape. Tewayn had apparently never worried about how easy the tomb might be to open from the inside. Once she was on all fours, she looked around to make sure the circle of stones wasn't falling, or closing in, or anything similarly cataclysmic, and then stood up to breathe the beautifully free, cold air.

Before she was done admiring the atmosphere, she had taken

her bearings on a faint but unmistakable smell of pork and carrots. After a few steps, she found the footprints and retraced her previous trip. Just beyond the circle of stones, she turned to look back.

She shook her head. The bodies below were not men put to death by the fierce ghost. After listening to Tewayn for a few sentences, Polijn had realized they had died of boredom and the cold, trapped by Tewayn's windy ways and the door that closed above them. She had been wrong there too. The men were free to walk out at any time. Greed had held them in their places until the cold finished them off.

She pulled her scarf back up over her mouth. They weren't bad men, at least two-thirds of them. She could go back and whisper the secret. But the door, after all, was open, and if they didn't come to their senses as their noses and fingers grew stiff, a word from her wouldn't do it. The best she could do for them, really, was return to the hut, feed the fire, and make sure any stew she left from her own supper didn't burn.

Polijn nodded to herself and crunched on through the snow. The tall man was correct. You had to go at these problems with a logical mind. ♫

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken:

DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 101. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the April issue.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. "Fatherhood" author: 2 wds.	112	92	56	116	124	17	84	146	172
B. Stand-up output	63	43	204	107	20	153	175	103	
C. Carl Switzer's character	74	30	47	177	135	155	183		
D. 1931 Chicago Tribune debut: 2 wds.	179	195	49	131	42	23	169	143	76
E. Hold in: 2 wds.	120	144	57	44	8	102	211	28	
F. Articulates	40	1	192	69	25	86			
G. Daily department: 2 wds.	194	101	54	187	137	22	71	35	
H. Skedaddle: hyph. wd.	105	127	61	186	202	9	147	91	
I. Churns	149	168	70	111	206	174	123	24	
J. Union entrant of July 26, 1788: 2 wds.	126	165	134	96	200	18	93		
K. Divorce repercussion	55	184	161	90	152	207	13		
L. Ezra follower	162	99	125	77	27	37	157	79	
M. Culinary casing	212	72	117	11	59	170	193		
N. "Foucault's Pendulum" author: 2 wds.	201	197	32	41	10	98	133	3	128 140
O. Black Knight rival	95	158	119	87	164	151	6	176	48 208
P. Jeanette Lee's milieu: 2 wds.	66	14	29	73	210	83	199	130	182 196
Q. City on Lake Winnebago	154	114	62	189	67	81	203		
R. Hardly take seriously: 2 wds.	166	180	60	138	52	33	156	15	

		1	F	2	S	3	N			4	X	5	Q	6	O	7	Z	8	E	9	H	10	N						
		11	M	12	T	13	K			14	P	15	R			16	S	17	A	18	J	19	W	20	B	21	U		
22	G	23	D	24	I			25	F	26	X	27	L	28	E	29	P	30	C	31	Y			32	N	33	R	34	X
35	G	36	T			37	L	38	V			39	Y	40	F	41	N			42	D	43	B			44	E	45	V
46	X			47	C	48	O	49	D	50	U			51	W	52	R	53	S	54	G			55	K	56	A	57	E
58	Z	59	M	60	R	61	H	62	Q			63	B	64	T	65	Y	66	P	67	U	68	S	69	F			70	I
71	G			72	M			73	P	74	C	75	V	76	D	77	L	78	X			79	L	80	Y	81	Q		
82	Z	83	P	84	A	85	W	86	F			87	O	88	Y	89	S	90	K			91	H	92	A	93	J	94	V
		95	O	96	J	97	T	98	N	99	L	100	Y	101	G	102	E	103	B			104	Z	105	H	106	T	107	B
		108	S	109	X	110	Y	111	I			112	A	113	U			114	Q	115	U	116	A	117	M	118	Y	119	O
		120	E	121	V			122	Z	123	I	124	A	125	L	126	J	127	H	128	N	129	W	130	P			131	D
132	Z	133	N	134	J	135	C	136	V	137	G	138	R	139	S			140	N	141	U			142	Z			143	D
144	E	145	U	146	A	147	H	148	W	149	I	150	T	151	O	152	K	153	B			154	Q	155	C			156	R
157	L	158	O	159	W	160	X			161	K	162	L			163	T	164	O	165	J			166	R	167	T	168	I
169	D	170	M			171	X	172	A	173	W	174	I	175	B	176	O			177	C	178	S	179	D			180	R
		181	Z	182	P	183	C	184	K	185	S	186	H	187	G			188	U	189	Q	190	W	191	X	192	F	193	M
		194	G	195	D	196	P	197	N			198	U	199	P	200	J	201	N	202	H			203	Q	204	B		
		205	W	206	I	207	K					208	O	209	V	210	P	211	E	212	M	213	X						

S. Swiss export

89 16 108 139 178 185 2 53 68

T. Rubrics, perhaps

36 150 106 12 64 163 167 97

U. 1995 Peter Falk movie

141 67 115 145 21 198 50 113 188

V. Optical solution

94 121 136 75 209 38 45

W. Validating account

159 85 173 19 129 205 190 148 51

X. Rule-making body:
2 wds.

109 4 191 46 78 160 34 26 171 213

Y. Cures

100 31 65 118 39 80 88 110

Z. Sharp-billed bird

132 7 122 181 142 104 82 58

MARLEY'S PACKAGE

JOHN C. BOLAND

One doesn't expect intelligence-gathering to share the table with poetry, but Collins was grinning like a wolf with a soft throat in view as he lowered his glass. "Thou hast betrayed thy secret, as a bird betrays her nest, by striving to conceal it," he announced.

"Oh God," said his wife.

"That's in the training manual, isn't it?" said Charles Marley, who recognized the quote, couldn't remember its author, and agreed with its substance.

"Yes, Longfellow." Collins sipped his after-dinner drink. "You, Charlie, pretending so hard you haven't been reactivated. Everyone knows you carried the new director's book bag his first few years. Held his milk money. Old Castaneda figures it's your left hand directing the purge."

"How is Carlos?"

The joke was too old for either of them to bother smiling. It dated people, their choice of cover names.

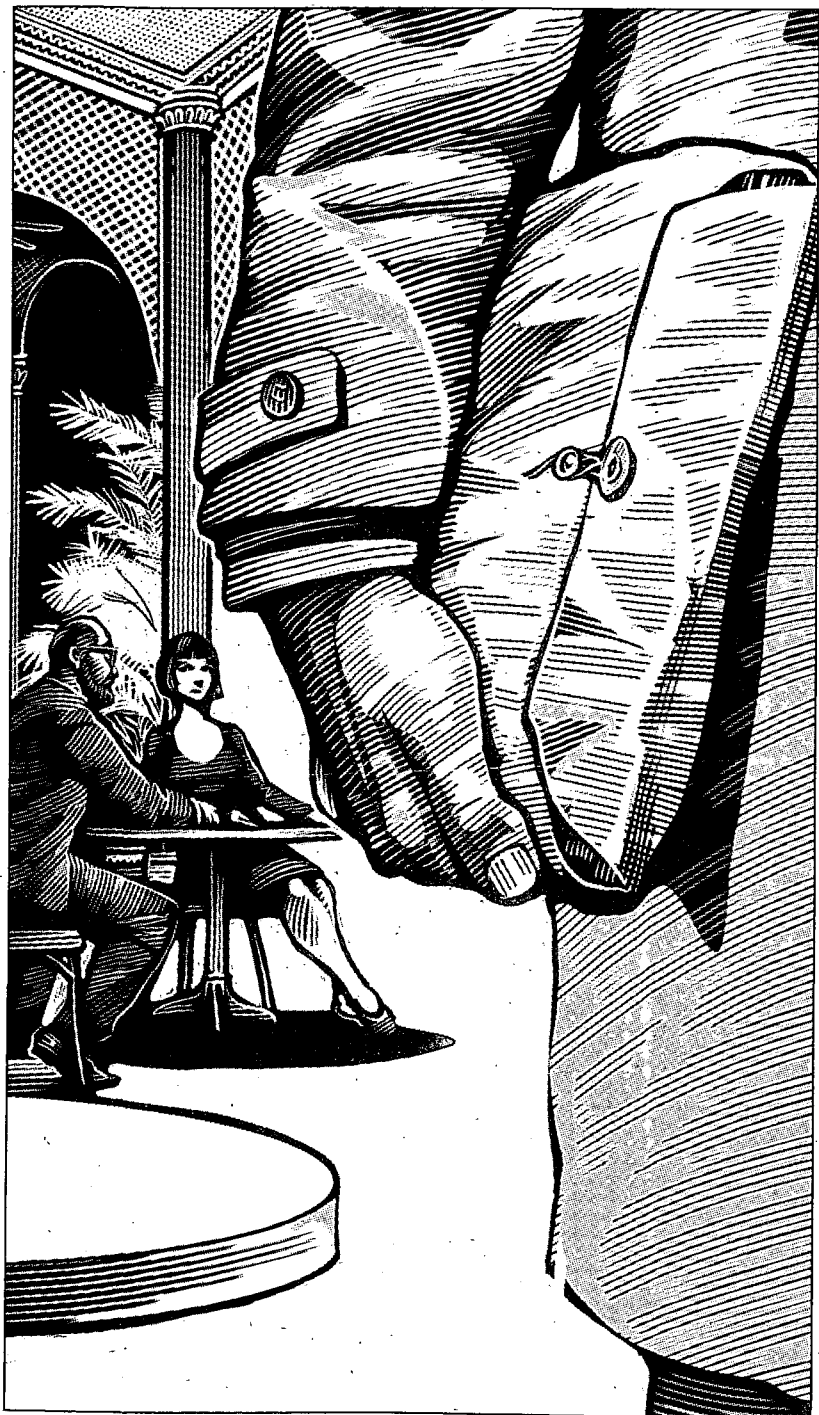
"His wife died, so he's splendid, chasing young Caribbean girls around the retirement home. Dreaming, actually, that the new director might call him back. An assassin in a motorized wheelchair. His mind is good."

"Not that good, if he believes Popper would call either of us back," Marley said.

"'Methinks he doth protest too much,'" Collins said, looking to his wife for applause and obtaining only a grimace.

"Was that in your stupid training manual too?" she asked.

Collins, who had left active service in the nineties, had been involved in money-laundering for nearly three years. His CIA pension was adequate, the family home in Cleveland Park was long paid for and had appreciated vastly, his two sons were finished with college and lived far away. But a man in his early fifties needed something to do with the rest of his life—ideally something remunerative. Running black accounts through a downtown bank filled the bill.



The bank, which was both old-line and political, had been delighted to get him as an officer. The chairman had been a commerce secretary several administrations ago. The board of directors included a law school dean, a retired two-star general, and a former deputy secretary of state, as well as several people who knew something about banking. Another director, a woman who had worked almost thirty years at the agency, had recommended Collins for the new post of senior vice president for overseas investment. She had thought the bank needed a money-laundering officer who could be counted on.

There were, of course, varieties of money laundering. Collins apparently understood the differences. The bank had to keep its business on the right side of a policy line that was etched in sand. The year Collins signed on, Nigeria was in favor because of its oil reserves and distance from the Persian Gulf. When the Collinses had dinner with Marley, Nigeria had become a disappointment, but Eritrea, whose dictator was forward looking, seemed attractive for its long, porous border with Sudan.

Collins funneled money into offshore drilling one year and into airport development and gold mining the next. Because the money pipeline was sometimes idle, he worked with private clients as well.

One of the private clients, Daniel Rash, sold farm equipment throughout the developing world. The small implements measured fifty caliber. The larger ones could plow a tobacco field from the wings of a MiG-23. His business in land mines had fallen off, but the rest was always in demand.

"Rash isn't one of those dealers you can get into a hotel room, talking for the surveillance camera," Chick Donaldson said. "Like they say in Hollywood, he's got 'people.'"

"What?" said Marley.

"'People' who pick up his dry cleaning, that sort of thing. Rash has people who meet the buyers."

Sitting with his troublesome leg elevated, Marley wondered if the prospective buyers had "people" as well. He wondered if he should hire someone to fetch his dry cleaning. He already had a Russian woman who cleaned his townhouse, most of the rooms of which he didn't use any longer. He could also use someone to cook his meals. He realized he was thinking of looking for another wife, that was where this led, and shut the thought down.

Donaldson was fiddling with a cigar that looked all right between his fingers but absurd in his face. You had to have a certain kind of face that could handle a cigar poking out of it, and

Donaldson didn't have it. It helped if a smoker showed a little glint of teeth as he puffed.

"The thing is, we don't want to step on Helen's toes," Donaldson said.

Helen was the bank director who had put Collins in place.

"And we really don't want to shut Rash down," Donaldson said. He had a Hollywood look, sideswept dark hair, an upturned nose, lobeless ears. There was something androgynous in all that, like the ability he prized in himself of being able to think on several tracks at once, with an utter lack of commitment to any one of them.

"How friendly are you with the director?" Donaldson asked, and Marley was uncertain whether he had changed the subject.

"We did a tour in Mexico in the seventies." It was all in the files, Donaldson would already know.

"Larry Popper was your best man."

"That was no favor," Marley said.

"You trained him."

"So I've heard," Marley said.

It was, Marley knew, increasingly a world of intermediaries. Someone to haul your dirty clothes. Someone to negotiate stingers for the Congo. Someone like Chick Donaldson to sound out old colleagues.

Nobody was doing his own business.

Marley's role, for which he hadn't volunteered, was to be an intermediary between Director Popper and Collins. Or perhaps between Popper and gunrunner Rash.

It would be too clumsy for Marley to resurrect a friendship with Collins, which had never gone very deep. So he looked among his Washington acquaintances and settled on Melody Aichem, who was middle-aged, single, and involved in the arts. Her late husband had been an analyst at State. She was happy to go to the ballet with Marley, who looked good in a dinner suit and could talk about museum acquisitions. And she wasn't averse when he suggested a candidate for one of her boards. "Sheila Collins. I've known her for years," he said. "Her husband, who's now a banker, used to work with me."

Her eyes widened. Bankers' wives were better catches than the bankers themselves. Wives pointed out to husbands the competitive aspect of donations.

Melody Aichem brought them together for dinner, and two weeks later, having enjoyed the first meeting, the Collinses invited Charles Marley to their house one evening when, they regretted,

Melody wasn't available. Before dinner was over, Collins was calling him "Charlie." By the time the drinks were half done, they had gotten down to business.

"You've still got a hand in, Charlie, don't deny it," Collins said after his recitation of Longfellow.

"Denying does no good," Marley complained. "You don't believe the truth. But if I were still active, what would it matter?"

"It could mean a hundred thousand dollars."

"To whom?"

"To you." Collins was on his feet. To Marley's surprise, Sheila Collins had remained in the room. Her husband tilted a bottle over her glass. "That's your bonus, Charlie. All you have to do is get Director Popper to agree that Tazikstan should have independence, self-government, the blessings of democracy."

"Shouldn't all God's children?" his wife said.

"Just the Taziks right now," Collins said.

Marley stared for a moment at the crease in his trousers, wondering whose game he was playing. Not his own, certainly. He was seventy-two years old, and he couldn't think of anything to do with a hundred thousand except buy himself a seat on the board at his granddaughter's day school. He wondered if he was being set up, Collins and Popper having agreed they needed a fall guy. Marley had helped mentor Popper, it was true, but that experience hadn't made them friends.

"What's the rest of it?" Marley asked, wondering if he could detect the lies, if they would begin halfway through or at the outset.

"Would be nice if the Taziks could have a peaceful revolution, but that isn't in the cards," Collins said. "If the director gives the nod, we can have a five million dollar deal. Four percent commission, which you and I split. If the new group gets control, there's a gas-line concession that ends up in the right hands. It doesn't need much spinning, Charlie. This is a win-win."

Leaning forward, Collins reminded Marley of a sidewalk vendor pushing watches. The name on the dial seldom described the works.

"Where does the money come from?" Marley asked.

"What do you care?"

"Five million doesn't buy much."

"It gets the reformers friends, which is more important than guns."

"So this isn't an arms deal."

"God, no."

"But we're messing with the Russians."

"A little bit. Popper should like that."

"I'm not up to date on policy," Marley demurred.

Collins leaned back, grinning on one side, apparently his skeptical side, though he didn't repeat anything about Marley protesting too much. He really looked like a banker, having never looked like a spy. Too sensible for that. Candid blue eyes, thinning gray hair, crisp French cuffs, but nothing flashy on them. If he recommended a mutual fund, you knew it would be steady. The fact that *he* wasn't steady was so well concealed that for a while Marley felt only professional admiration for Collins. "Last I heard," the banker said, "our policy for Russia was friendship, including support for stability along her borders."

"Where would backing Tazik opposition fit in?"

"Wouldn't, Charlie, not at all. But it fits with the pipeline concession." Collins had dropped the grin. The business plan was on the table. It was up to Marley to show it to the Director of Central Intelligence.

Nine days later, Collins sent him to Paris.

Helen Turner met him at a restaurant near the stock exchange that wasn't frequented by spooks. When she was in operations, before becoming a bank director, she had run the accounts that kept some of the less successful pro-democracy groups in Africa in business. She carried a small briefbag that might have been full of lost causes. There was that air about her, that she dragged every failure with her.

"You know, when you were in Paris, I thought for a while you'd been turned," she said. "You were so chummy with those intellectuals, you know the ones I mean."

"No, I don't."

"The ones who pretended they weren't in Moscow's pocket."

He didn't like remembering his life as a young man. The subject always brought from memory a waving flower garden of young women, most of whom he had disappointed. The cute girl who had slept with everyone during the student uprising in 1968 would be closing in on sixty now, and the awareness of that fact only reminded Marley of how much of his life was gone. Whether the time had been well spent or misspent wasn't the point. In hindsight, everything looked misspent.

"I was the reason they brought you home," Helen Turner boasted. What had been the little Maoist's name?

"I heard this might be a weapons deal," Marley said, too bluntly for the surroundings.

"Where did you get such crap? Never mind. The big guy signed

off, that's all you need to care about. That and your commission." Her elbows were on the table. She still had to prove she was one of the boys. "We've got a correspondent bank here that will send the money on its next leg. That's if you're satisfied with the Taziks. I call them Larry and Moe. Curley apparently was blown up by the security apparat." She shook her head. "Tell me the truth, Charles. Can you think of any time we've gotten our money's worth from exiles?"

By "our money," she meant the Agency's.

"Chalabi worked out pretty well," Marley said, his face bland.

Helen Turner said a couple of words that proved, to her mind, that she was one of the boys.

Besides, it wasn't the Agency's money this time. Marley couldn't figure the two young Taziks for customers of Daniel Rash, the arms dealer. Their proper names were Alex Gresov and Juma Balzin. Neither of them looked over thirty years old. Their political experience, according to Helen Turner, consisted of putting up posters around the London School of Economics, where they studied. As there were fewer than twenty Taziks in London with political ideals, the two young men had emerged as natural leaders.

They had known better than to go home after forming a Democratic United Front with Alex's brother, Amad Gresov. Last summer Amad had accepted an invitation to come home and talk. "His car exploded outside the president's palace," his brother said. "It was a message to all the democratic forces in Tazikstan."

All six of them, Marley thought.

"My brother will be remembered as a hero."

"He was," said his friend. His trouser knees were worn. Their room was in a one-star hotel in the Marais, where the smell of couscous came up through the floor. If they were to be Agency assets, the five million would buy a few cell phones, laptops, printers, and a dozen cases of Moldovan wine for the ground troops back home. Gresov and Balzin would invest in image-building suits from Jermyn Street.

But they were going to be somebody else's assets. Alex Gresov had studied the economics of energy development. He had a square face, tightset eyes, spiky hair—and he spoke about pipelines and transportation costs per billion cubic feet of natural gas. Marley supposed he had his facts right or the people bankrolling him wouldn't have bothered. He wondered how many other Tazik groups were getting quiet funding.

Seed money, that was what they used to call it. Sprinkle seeds here and there among disaffected groups and pretty soon the old

regime had a half dozen flag-waving fronts pressing demands that could never be met. The next step depended on how soon the old regime rolled out the tanks.

Given how boldly one Gresov brother had been dispatched, Marley wouldn't have bet against Tazikstan's tanks.

They talked for three hours. Finally, Marley gave Alex Gresov a slip of paper that bore the number of a bank account in Brussels that would receive an infusion in the next twelve hours. He shook hands and left the hotel. He was in the bar of his hotel on Colbert when he spotted Daniel Rash's go-between.

The man's nom de guerre was Paul Koestler. He was sharing a table with a pretty young woman with short black hair. Neither of them was checking watches, neither staking out the door. Marley wouldn't have noticed except that he had known Paul Koestler for twenty years. Here, in his hotel, the coincidence was too much.

"Has the money been transferred?" Koestler asked when Marley sat down. He had a dense black beard that gave him a benign look, like a country priest.

"You're working for Rash now," Marley said. Not a question.

"This is Vikki." He spelled it. "Charles and I took a couple of shots at each other once. I wasn't trying to hit him. I wanted him to keep his head down. It kept popping up over that balustrade, so I kept shooting."

From the girl's expression, she had heard stories like that before. She was drinking fizzy water with several wedges of lime stuffed into the glass. It had taken Marley a moment to realize she wasn't French. Her eyes were almost as dark as her hair, which she had bleached pale on her upper lip and arms. Her English hadn't an accent. "I'll bet Charles was trying to hit you," she told her companion.

"He always took his job seriously."

"What are they buying?" Marley demanded.

"What do you care?" The man pushed a fat envelope across the table. "Your commission."

Marley didn't touch it.

"We'll just leave this here," Rash's man said.

Under his arm the envelope was as thick as a Sunday newspaper. He counted the money in his room. When he converted the packets of Swiss francs and euros into dollars, there was slightly more than a hundred thousand. He was supposed to take note of that, that he was dealing with people who didn't cheat friends on the exchange rate. In the morning, he visited two banks where he

was known. He called the phone numbers Helen Turner had left. No one answered. He took a taxi to the single-star hotel in the Marais where the Taziks had stayed. A clerk said the two young men had demanded a taxicab to Orly Airport the previous evening. Marley understood. They had wanted to be in Brussels when the banks opened.

He asked himself what they were buying. Five million, less commission, would enlist a couple of colonels who weren't sophisticated enough to know how much their disloyalty was worth. It might buy a minor cabinet minister who had been passed over too often when bank accounts were being stuffed. There might even be enough money left for office equipment. But since the vendor was Rash, the bank deposit would pay for hardware, not people. You couldn't equip an insurrection on that kind of money, but you could blow up the Sunday market every week and shell a few police stations.

Or, you could cut right to the heart of things. With a long-range rifle, the old despot could be retired without bothering with faxes and street protests.

Marley left the Taziks' hotel, watching doorways and automobiles, then calmed himself with a drink and realized he was being as paranoid as a trainee. Go-betweens were meant to be deceived. He had no need to know. He had done his job, and nobody would care what he did next. He read the newspapers that afternoon and was napping badly when an acquaintance from the French internal security office phoned.

"Alex Gresov and Juma Balzin are friends of yours, Charles?"

"What are the names?"

"Don't bother pretending," the intelligence officer said. "It would be good if you left France this evening."

"I don't get it," said Chick Donaldson. "What went wrong?"

"I don't know."

"You were there. Who did Rash send?"

"An Englishman who calls himself Paul Koestler sometimes." Marley didn't mention the girl. She hadn't mattered.

"So the Tazik boys were buying guns after all," Donaldson said, almost whistling to prove his astonishment, but that would have overdone it.

"If you say so."

"Where were they killed?"

"They were found in the back of a taxicab a kilometer from Orly."

"They got careless. Tazik state security must have been onto them."

"Yes, that must have been it."

"You didn't spot anyone?"

"No."

"Damned embarrassing."

"Yes."

"Well, it wasn't your fault, Charles. I'll make sure the director understands that."

"That's good of you."

"The DCI's grateful you lent your experience."

Marley nodded.

It was a passable fall day, and after he got rid of Donaldson he continued downhill to visit the zoo's aviary. His troublesome leg was taking his weight. He called Collins, whose secretary said he was busy. He called a banker friend in Paris, who promised to ask the question of people he knew in Brussels. Marley couldn't think of anyone else to call.

The next morning, the Paris banker reported that the Washington, D.C., bank's five million dollars had never arrived in Brussels.

"I don't suppose your contacts extend to Switzerland?" Marley asked.

"Sorry, Charles."

It didn't have to be Switzerland. Liechtenstein, Austria, even France were good places to ferret away cash. Where the money had gone didn't matter. The question was who? Whose laundry had he fetched?

Confronting Collins would be dramatically satisfying, but Marley understood he would be revealing himself as twice the fool Collins assumed he was. Instead of showing his anger, he was cheerful when they had lunch several days later. He talked as if the Paris job were almost forgotten. Finally, he let a note of complaint creep into his voice. "Donaldson debriefed me. He says he doesn't blame me, but I think he does."

Collins sighed. "Well, it was a ballsup, wasn't it, Charlie?"

Marley set down his fork. "Not altogether. Two boys who were a nuisance got lured into the open."

"You think that was the operation?"

"No, you can hire a hit for a lot less. I think it was a package deal. A bribe for someone in Tazikstan, maybe the oil minister, with the reformers taken off as a bonus. What I wonder is who put the package together? Rash? Helen? You?"

"Charlie, Charlie." The banker leaned back from the table. He'd eaten only salad. His tie and shirt were spotless.

"Do you expect your client will get his pipeline concession?" Marley asked.

Collins's face was made for smugness. "I'm certain of it. Wouldn't have bothered otherwise."

"Did Popper know?"

"What do you suppose?"

He was my protégé, Marley thought.

Collins's smile faded into a smirk of annoyance. "What do you care? You got your cut. You should buy this lunch, damn it, and be grateful people still think of you." 🐦

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Thank you for your readership!



DAVE STEVENS, I PRESUME?

DAVE ZELTSERMAN

The bar seemed pricey for Wichita, but they had the brand of gin I liked and they allowed smoking; and after a long day on the road I figured I deserved to indulge myself a little. I was on my third martini when I noticed her, and she was certainly worth noticing—brunette, mid twenties, slender, very nice figure, which the miniskirt she was wearing didn't do much to hide.

I don't think I was so much staring at her as gazing in her direction, but the look she gave me turned me straight around. If I wasn't a little high from the martinis, I would've put two and two together faster, when I caught her out of the corner of my eye, making a beeline toward me. Before I knew it, she was next to me, tossing her drink in my face. I made the mistake of letting go of my glass to reach for a napkin, and my seven dollar Bombay Blue Sapphire martini was left dripping down my neck also.

"You dirty rotten bastard," she forced out in a breathless tone, her small hands clenched into fists. "I hope you rot in hell."

She then turned on her heels. I sat silently and watched as a hundred and five pounds of pure fury stormed out of the bar. Then I mopped up my face as best I could, silently cursed Dave Stevens, and signaled to the bartender for another drink.

"That was quite a show," the bartender said as he raised an eyebrow. He was a big man, mostly bald, with way too much flesh on his face—like a couple of extra layers of stucco had been slapped on. He tried giving me a smile, but there wasn't much life to it.

"I never saw her before," I told him.

"I would've bet otherwise."

I didn't bother responding. What would've been the point? Somewhat reluctantly, he poured me a fresh martini. I could tell he'd rather have me leave his establishment than sit there at his bar, but hell, it wasn't my fault that gal threw her drink in my face and then mine. I just had the bad fortune of looking exactly like Dave Stevens.

If this had been the first time something like that had happened to me it probably would've left me stunned, but it wasn't the first time. Far from it. So I sat glumly drinking my freshly made martini, and over the din of voices and ice clinking in glasses and other bar noises, I could make out the faint rumbling sound of the universe laughing over the cosmic joke that it had on me.

And it was a good one.

Given how poorly I always did with women, it surprised me how often something like this did happen to me. But this Stevens guy has something I don't—charisma, extreme confidence, animal magnetism, I don't know exactly what—but he has no trouble breaking hearts and inspiring violent passion in the girls he dumps. In contrast, the few girlfriends I've broken up with over the years couldn't have cared less.

I finished the martini and asked the bartender for another. As I sat there waiting for it, I thought of Dave Stevens, something I hadn't done in almost two years. While he might look exactly like me, there's something special about him that women gravitate toward. There's no denying that. One of these days I'll meet up with him and see if I can find out what it is. Maybe also knock out a few of his teeth in the process.

My own name is Andy Lenscher. For seven years I sold copier machines in the Mid-Atlantic, and during that time somehow ended up shadowing Stevens. I'd be sitting in a bar in Reston, Virginia, or Scranton, Pennsylvania, wherever, and invariably run into one of Stevens's pissed-off and furious ex-flings. As best I could figure out, he sold women's undergarments in the same cities that I sold copiers. I know some of you are probably thinking that this is going to turn out to be one of those split personality stories where in the end I realize I am in fact Dave Stevens. Nope, no such luck. This is just one of those odd coincidences where the two of us kept traveling in the same cities, and I always had the misfortune of being several months behind him and paying the price for his bad behavior.

During those years, I was yelled at, bitten, kicked, spat on, and punched by some very attractive women I'd never seen before. At first I tried to explain myself to these women, but of course it turned out that I also sound exactly like Dave Stevens. I learned the best thing to do was to keep quiet, try my best to protect my vital organs, and hope their rage would blow over quickly. After one of them tried to run me over in a downtown Bethesda crosswalk, I put in a transfer to another sales district. The problem was my company didn't want to move me—I was too valuable where I was and had too good a rapport with my customers. They

dragged their heels and five months later I was shot at outside a motel in Pittsburgh. Whoever it was missed, but that was the final straw. I quit my job and joined up with a competitor who was able to offer me their Midwest district.

That was two years ago. The Midwest was far less lucrative than my old territory, and I made about half the money that I used to, but at least I didn't have Dave Stevens to worry about.

At least until those two drinks were tossed in my face.

With a sick feeling in my gut, I realized Stevens must have switched territories also, probably for his own safety. Once again I was shadowing the sonofabitch. And once again the cosmos was having a good long laugh at my expense.

I didn't sleep much that night. After Wichita, I was going to be driving north to Topeka, then on to Lawrence and Kansas City, and all I could think of was running into more of Stevens's ex-flings. As it was, I was wide awake at six thirty, when the alarm

I was yelled at, bitten, kicked, spat on, and punched by some very attractive women I'd never seen before.

went off. I showered and dressed quickly, and after checking out of my motel, found a roadside diner where I

ordered corned-beef hash and poached eggs. I didn't have much of an appetite, mostly pushed my food around the plate, but the three cups of coffee helped. The waitress, a motherly type who looked like she could be anywhere from sixty to eighty, gave me a concerned look.

"What's wrong, hon?" she asked. "You hardly touched your food. Anything wrong with it?"

"Everything's fine. I guess I'm just not as hungry as I thought I was."

She gave me a sympathetic smile. "Hon, you should try to eat. And if you want to tell me what's troubling you, I'm all ears."

There was nothing but genuine concern in the smile she gave me. That's the thing with Midwesterners, they're the most decent salt o' the earth types you'll ever run into. But how in the world could I tell her, or anyone else for that matter, about Dave Stevens?

"Nothing more than I got a long day ahead of me," I told her. "But I'll make more of an effort." I took several bites of the hash while she stood and watched approvingly. The bill for my food came to five dollars and seventy-four cents. When she turned to take another customer's order, I dropped twenty dollars next to my plate and left the diner.

I had several sales calls to make before leaving Wichita. It was at

the first one, The People's Credit Union of Wichita, where I had an appointment to talk with the operations manager about switching their business to us, when I spotted her. I stopped dead in my tracks. According to the plaque on her desk she was Lena Hanson, and she worked as a loan officer. She was sitting down so I could only see her from the waist up, but that was enough to know she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen or was ever going to see. For a long moment I stood there lost in her golden hair and green eyes and perfect soft lips, watching as she absent-mindedly chewed on the end of a pen.

She sensed that I was staring at her. As her eyes caught mine, at first there was nothing but a slight frown, then I could see the recognition hit her.

She knew Dave Stevens, dammit!

I wanted to bolt, pretend I never saw her, anything, as long as I wouldn't have to stand there and watch her hate me. But I couldn't move. It was like my legs had turned into bags of wet sand, and I had no strength to move them. So I stood frozen, dreading what was coming, but unable to look away. The hatred never came, though. Her face showed something more like surprise, maybe even fear. She seemed to freeze up too, her color dropping several shades. Then, looking around to see if anyone was watching us, she stood up and came out from behind her desk. As I looked at her I realized she was even more beautiful than I had at first imagined. Her body was damned near perfect. Thin, athletic, but with all the right curves. And those legs, Jesus, I felt my mouth grow dry as I looked at those legs.

Moving cautiously, she walked over to me, stopping about two feet away. "How . . . what are you doing here?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

There was a faint smell from her, something like magnolia blossoms, at least that's what I would've imagined magnolia blossoms to smell like. I wouldn't have been able to move away from her if my life depended on it. Not if you'd put a knife to my throat. Over the pounding in my head, I heard myself telling her that I had to see her, that I couldn't leave things the way we had left them before.

Fear flickered for a moment in those heart-stopping green eyes. "Meet me tonight at Maloney's. Seven o'clock. We'll talk then."

She glanced around to check whether anyone had noticed us, and then walked back to her desk. She seemed like some fragile, beautiful porcelain statue as she sat staring intently at her hands folded in front of her, her face tense, unmoving. I watched her for a long moment and then turned and left the office. I didn't stop until I got into my car.

I sat there feeling shaky inside. After taking a few deep breaths, I called the manager at the credit union whom I was supposed to meet and told him I had to cancel our appointment. He didn't much care. There was only a small chance he would've switched his business anyway. After hanging up, I closed my eyes and thought about Lena Hanson.

I had never pretended to be Dave Stevens before. I didn't intend to with Lena either, but the words just came out of me. Of course I could've gone back in there and told her who I really was, but I didn't. I had to meet with her. I had to have a chance with her somehow. The thought of doing anything else was suffocating. Later I'd figure out a way to set things straight between us, but until that time I would be Dave Stevens. I had no choice.

With the way I was feeling, I knew there was no point in going through with any sales calls, so I canceled the rest of the ones I had that day. I couldn't keep from thinking about Lena, about the fear I saw in her eyes. I got the sense that she wasn't so much afraid of Stevens as she was of being seen with him. Then it hit me. It was only a hunch, but in my gut I knew it was more than that.

I drove to the public library. While they only kept a week's worth of Wichita *Tribunes* on the shelves, I was able to access all the old copies I needed online. After an hour and a half of searching, I found what I was looking for. Five months earlier two hundred thousand dollars was reported missing from the credit union where Lena worked. I found more stories about the missing money over the next few weeks' worth of papers, but what it came down to was that they had no leads or suspects.

I sat for a while thinking it over. Then I found a yellow pages, copied down the numbers of the motels in the area, and went back to my car so I could have some privacy. I went through the list of phone numbers, calling each motel and telling the clerk that I was Dave Stevens and thought I might have left my Rolex in my room the last time I was there. The first eight motels had no record of a Stevens ever staying there, the ninth confirmed that I'd been there five months earlier. The desk clerk I spoke with gave me the date Stevens checked out—the day before Lena's credit union had reported the missing money. He insisted that no Rolex had been left in the room. I told him I'd probably misplaced it somewhere else and thanked him for his time.

So there you had it. Five months ago Stevens had convinced Lena to rob her credit union, and then skipped with the money, leaving her high and dry. No wonder she reacted the way she did when I showed up there.

As the magnitude of what I was getting involved in fully hit me, I started to panic. I'd never broken the law in my life—never even come close, and here I was getting in the middle of a two-hundred-grand robbery. As far as Lena was concerned, I was the guy who planned it and I was the guy with the money. I took out my Palm Pilot and brought up my schedule from five months earlier and saw that I had sales calls in Topeka at the time of the robbery. Topeka to Wichita is only a little over two hours. I could easily have traveled back and forth between the two cities. If Lena accused me of being the guy she robbed the credit union with, there would be no way of me proving otherwise.

I decided then to leave Wichita. I'd follow through with my sales calls in Topeka, Lawrence, and Kansas City, and then I'd quit and find a job in another part of the country. Maybe California.

After twenty minutes of driving hard, I was past the city limits and hitting the cornfields. Miles and miles of cornfields—as far as the eye could see. As I drove, though, I couldn't get rid of the shakiness inside, and I couldn't keep from thinking of Lena. About thirty miles from Topeka I stopped at a roadside diner, but I just didn't have much of an appetite and left most of my food untouched. I had a couple of cigarettes and then continued driving. By four, I pulled into a motel off the highway a couple of miles outside of Topeka.

I sat in my car feeling too weak to move, as if all the strength had been bled out of me. I just kept thinking of Lena, of how beautiful she was. It was as if her image had been burned into my brain. I was thirty-two, and so far my life had been nothing but one restless moment after the next. I think that's why I ended up in sales, so I'd always be on the move, always trying to outrun the restlessness. I know this will sound sappy—after all, I knew almost nothing about Lena and only saw her for at most a minute—but I couldn't keep from thinking that somehow she could bring me some peace. And hell, if she could fall for Stevens, then why not me? I thought through a dozen different scenarios where I'd convince her to join me out in California. Nothing quite clicked, but I realized I couldn't just give up. At five o'clock I was still sitting in my car. I made the only decision I could make and headed back toward Wichita.

I drove like a madman, my hand aching as I gripped the wheel. As I approached Wichita County, I called information and got the address for Maloney's. At a quarter to seven I pulled into Maloney's parking lot. From the outside, the place looked like a

dive. A drab, concrete, one story structure with a lone neon sign out front. I waited in the car and watched as Lena pulled in a few minutes before seven. I felt my heart jump as I watched her get out of her car and enter Maloney's. She had changed her clothes and now wore a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She was breathtaking in it. I followed her into the place.

Maloney's was as much of a dive inside as it was out. The smell of stale cigarettes permeated the place, and there were just enough overhead fluorescent lights to keep the room mostly in shadows. About a half dozen guys were sitting at the bar, nobody at any of the tables. Lena jumped a bit when I took hold of her elbow, but she let me lead her to one of the tables in the back where we'd be able to talk without being overheard.

"What next?" she asked.

"Let me get us some drinks. What do you want?"

She shrugged. "I guess a beer."

I went to the bar and got two drafts. When I returned to the table, Lena was watching me intently. Her skin had lost most of its color.

"You were watching me from the parking lot when I pulled in, weren't you?"

I didn't say anything. Instead, I looked away from those mesmerizing green eyes and took a long drink of my beer.

"Why'd you let me walk in here?" she asked.

Confused, I asked, "What else was I going to do?"

She shook her head, smiling over some private joke. "Again, what next?"

As I watched the anxiety tighten the skin around her eyes and mouth, I wanted to end the charade, but I didn't see how I could do it without her either walking out on me or not believing me. So I kept the lie going, mumbling something about how she was all I'd been able to think about the last five months. I felt a hotness flushing my face as I added, "I couldn't just leave things the way we ended them before."

The anxiety in her eyes was too much for me. I reached out to take hold of her hand, anything to try to comfort her, but she jerked back from me and knocked my beer over.

"That was an accident," she said.

"I know, don't worry about it."

"I'll get you another one."

"You don't have to—"

She didn't bother listening to me. As I watched her walk back to the bar, I felt sick inside. I decided enough was enough, I'd tell her the truth and let the chips fall where they may.

When she brought me back another beer, I looked away from her

as I drank down half of it. "I'm not who you think I am," I told her. I tried to make eye contact but couldn't quite do it. Self-consciously, I wiped a sleeve across my face. "I'm not Dave Stevens. I know I look like him, but I'm not him." I paused, then forced myself to meet her stare. "I know about the two hundred thousand you two stole. I'm not going to say anything to anyone about it."

She sat quietly, her eyes narrowed to thin slits as she stared at me. I waited for her to say something, but nothing came.

"I don't know why I pretended to be Stevens before," I said after a while. "When I saw you I guess I went kind of nuts and, well, from your reaction, I knew you knew Stevens. It just happened. I'm sorry."

Still nothing from her. "I know this is going to sound crazy," I went on, "but things could work out with us. Besides, you can't stay in Wichita. Sooner or later someone's going to find out about the money."

I realized I was slurring my words, and my eyelids had gotten heavy. I put my elbow down in the middle of the spilt beer so I could support my head.

"So what if someone did," Lena was saying, her voice barely above a whisper. "You were the one who stole it. No one can connect me to it."

I had gotten so tired. I could barely keep my eyes open. The next thing I knew the side of my face hit the table. Then blackness.

Consciousness flickered on and off for the next few minutes. At one point I remember two guys dragging me to a car. Lena was saying something about me having too much to drink, but that she'd take care of me. I tried to say something, but nothing audible came out. Then the world disappeared, and the next thing I knew I was being bounced back and forth. I was still mostly out of it, and it took a while for me to realize that I was sitting in the passenger seat of Lena's car. As she drove, a smoldering intensity burned on her face.

When Lena noticed me, her lips twisted into a thin smile. "Finally awake, huh?" she asked.

I was being jostled back and forth in my seat like a rag doll. Whatever I'd been drugged with, I still didn't have the strength to talk or even hold myself upright. From what I could tell, we were on a dirt road.

"I don't know what type of game you thought you were playing, but it wasn't very bright of you to give me a second chance," she said.

In the moonlight her face looked pale and grim, but I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer. I let them close.

Next thing I was aware of was a clapping noise, mixed in with someone yelling over and over again. "Wake up." Lena was slapping me in the face. When I opened my eyes, she pushed something hard and cold against my temple.

"You should be able to move by now," she said. "Get out of the car."

"Lena, this is all a mistake—" I had to stop for a moment, my throat feeling as if I'd swallowed a handful of sawdust. "You don't have to do this . . ."

"Shut up!" She pushed the gun barrel harder into my temple. "If you don't get out now, I'll kill you right here and leave you for the crows and raccoons."

I caught a glimpse of her face. There was nothing beautiful about it anymore; it had been transformed into something hard and violent. With some effort, I opened the car door and got to my feet. Lena followed, keeping the gun trained on my chest.

"Start walking," she ordered.

We were on some sort of path. I could barely lift my feet and moved about as fast as if I were wading through a pool of molasses.

She said, "I have to admit I'm curious. How'd you do it, Dave?"

"I don't know what you're asking. And I told you before, I'm not Stevens—"

"You don't want to tell me, fine, you can keep your secret. But I would've thought you had more brains than to show up the way you did. Especially after last time."

My eyes were starting to adjust to the moonlight. I could make out what looked like a small structure up ahead.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You should remember this place. This is where we said our last good-byes."

As I got closer to it, I realized the structure was the remains of a shack. We walked past it, and that was when I saw the well.

"Lena, please—"

"Shut up!"

The base of the well was stone, maybe two feet high. She backed me up until I was against it.

"Do me a favor, Dave, this time die like you're supposed to," Lena muttered half under her breath. With her arm outstretched, her gun was only inches away from me.

In the moonlight, I could see the knuckles on her gun hand turn white. I could see my death shining brightly in her eyes.

Something happened then. I'm not sure what the noise was—an animal howling or maybe a groan of some type—but whatever it

was, it seemed to come from deep inside the well, and it distracted her for a split second, which was long enough for me to grab her gun hand.

My muscles were still rubbery, and she fought with a manic intensity, but I was still able to slam her gun hand down against the base of the well. The gun tumbled down into it. We both froze, waiting for the sound of a splash, but there was nothing. It just disappeared as if it had fallen into a bottomless hole. I faced Lena then. The pale grimness faded from her eyes and mouth. She started to look more like she had when I first saw her. Beautiful, vulnerable . . .

"Daye," she said, her voice a breathless whisper, "let's forget this. We can still work something out."

I hit her in the jaw and knocked her out cold. After lowering her to the ground, I searched through her pockets and found my cell phone on her, then called the police and told them a woman had tried to kill me, and that there was a dead body in a well. My phone had GPS tracking, and I gave them my coordinates. The person I spoke to told me that officers would be right out.

It took longer than I expected for the police to show up. While I waited, Lena started to come to. I flipped her over and sat on her. As she realized what was happening, she started swearing at me, but I ignored it. When she heard the police sirens she struggled harder, and I saw the same brittle grimness from before come over her face.

"You're making a big mistake," she forced out, in something that was more of a hiss than a human voice. "We can still split the money instead of both of us going to prison."

I ignored her and pushed down harder to keep her on the ground. When I heard car doors open and slam, I yelled where I was and kept yelling until I saw two wide-eyed state troopers come through the woods. They both had their guns drawn.

"Help!" Lena yelled, her voice mostly a hoarse whisper at this point.

"Move slowly off her," one of the officers warned me.

I shook my head.

"My name is Andy Lenscher," I said. "This is Lena Hanson. Five months ago she stole two hundred thousand dollars from the People's Credit Union of Wichita. She killed the man she stole it with. His body's in the well."

The two officers exchanged glances. One officer kept his service revolver trained on me while the other flashed a light down into the well.

"There's something down there," he said, his face as white as the moon.

While we waited for the emergency workers to come, I told the two officers the whole story. They looked skeptical, but they put Lena in handcuffs. I could tell from her expression that for the first time, she realized I wasn't Dave Stevens.

It didn't take long for the emergency workers to get Dave Stevens's body out of the well. While his face was mostly rotted away, there was enough left for me to see the resemblance. One of the EMT workers even noticed it and remarked about it to me. I asked him why I didn't hear the gun splash when it dropped in there.

"Well's bone-dry. The gun must've landed on him."

I thought about the sound that distracted Lena enough to keep her from killing me. I know it probably didn't come from the well. It probably came from an animal in the woods, or maybe it did come from Stevens's body adjusting a certain way. But as I looked at him, I'd like to think that it was some kind of cosmic settlement for all the grief he had caused me. That somehow he saved my life.

As they carted away his corpse, I nodded farewell to Dave Stevens. ♀

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

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From "Two Bottles of Relish" (192-) by Lord Dunsany

—Lord Dunsany

The girl had two hundred pounds, and he got every penny of it, and she utterly disappeared. And Scotland Yard couldn't find her.

THE CLEVER COCKATOO

“Well, that’s my sister,” said Mrs. Lancey, in a low voice. “What do you think of her, now you’ve spoken to her?”

Philip Trent, newly arrived from England, stood by his hostess within the loggia of an Italian villa looking out upon a prospect of such loveliness as has enchanted and enslaved the Northern mind from age to age. Before the villa lay a long paved terrace, and by the balustrade of it a woman stood looking out over the lake and conversing with a tall, grey-haired man.

“Ten minutes is rather a short acquaintance,” Trent replied. “Besides, I was attending rather more to her companion. Mynheer Scheffer is the first Dutchman I have met on social terms. One thing about Lady Bosworth is clear to me, though. She is the most beautiful thing in sight, which is saying a good deal.”

Mrs. Lancey laughed.

“But I want you to take a personal interest in her, Philip; it means nothing, I know, when you talk like that. I care a great deal about Isabel; she is far more to me than any other woman. That’s rather rare between sisters, I believe. And it makes me wretched to know that there’s something wrong with her.”

“With her health, do you mean? One wouldn’t think so.”

“Yes, but I fear it is that.”

“Is it possible?” said Trent. “Why, Edith, the woman has the complexion of a child and the step of a racehorse and eyes like jewels. She looks like Atalanta in blue linen.”

“Did Atalanta marry an Egyptian mummy?” enquired Mrs. Lancey.

“It is true,” said Trent thoughtfully, “that Sir Peregrine looks rather as if he had been dug up somewhere. But I think he owes much of his professional success to that. People like a great doctor to look more or less unhealthy.”

“Perhaps they do; but I don’t think the doctor’s wife enjoys it very much. Isabel is always happiest when away from him—if he

were here now she would be quite different from what you see. You know, Philip, their marriage hasn't been a success—I always knew it wouldn't be."

Trent shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's drop the subject, Edith. Tell me why you want me to know about Lady Bosworth having something the matter with her. I'm not a physician."

"No; but there's something very puzzling about it, as you will see; and you are clever at getting at the truth about things other people don't understand. Now, I'll tell you no more. I only want you to observe Bella particularly at dinner this evening, and tell me afterwards what you think. You'll be sitting opposite to her, between me and Agatha Stone. Now go and talk to her and the Dutchman."

"Scheffer's appearance interests me," remarked Trent. "He has a face curiously like Frederick the Great's, and yet there's a difference—he doesn't look quite as if his soul were lost for ever and ever."

"Well, go and ask him about it," suggested Mrs. Lancey.

When the party of seven sat down to dinner that evening, Lady Bosworth had just descended from her room. Trent perceived no change in her; she talked enthusiastically of the loveliness of the Italian evening, and joined in a conversation that was general and lively. It was only after some ten minutes that she fell silent, and that a new look came over her face.

Little by little all animation departed from it. Her eyes grew heavy and dull, her red lips were parted in a foolish smile, and to the high, fresh tint of her cheek there succeeded a disagreeable pallor.

All charm, all personal force had departed. It needed an effort to recall her quaint, vivacious talk of an hour ago, now that she sat looking vaguely at the table before her, and uttering occasionally a blank monosyllable in reply to the discourse that Mr. Scheffer poured into her ear. It was not, Trent told himself, that anything abnormal was done. It was the staring fact that Lady Bosworth was not herself, but someone wholly of another kind, that opened a new and unknown spring of revulsion in the recesses of his heart.

An hour later Mrs. Lancey carried Trent off to a garden-seat facing the lake.

"Well?" she said quietly.

"It's very strange, and rather ghastly," he answered, nursing his knee. "But if you hadn't told me it puzzled you, I should have thought it was easy to find an explanation."

"Drugs, you mean?" He nodded. "Of course everybody must

think so. George does, I know. It's horrible!" declared Mrs. Lancey, with a thump on the arm of the seat. "Agatha Stone began hinting at it after the first few days. Gossiping cat! She loathes Isabel, and she'll spread it round everywhere that my sister is a drug-fiend. Philip, I asked her point blank if she was taking anything that could account for it. She was much offended at that; told me I had known her long enough to know she never had done and never would do such a thing. And though Isabel has her faults, she's absolutely truthful."

Trent looked on the ground. "Yes; but you may have heard—"

"Oh, I know! They say that kind of habit makes people lie and deceive who never did before. But, you see, she is so completely herself, except just as this time. I simply couldn't make up my mind to disbelieve her. And, besides, if Bella is peculiar about anything, it's clean, wholesome, hygienic living. She has every sort of carbolicky idea. She never uses scent or powder or any kind of before-and-after stuff, never puts anything on her hair; she is washing herself from morning till night, but she always uses ordinary yellow soap. She never touches anything alcoholic, or tea, or coffee. You wouldn't think she had that kind of fad to look at her and her clothes; but she has; and I can't think of anything in the world she would despise more than dosing herself with things."

"How long has it been going on?"

"This is the seventh evening. I entreated her to see a doctor; but she hates the idea of being doctored. She says it's sure to pass off and that it doesn't make any difference to her general health. George, who has always been devoted to her, only talks to her now with an effort. Randolph Stone is just the same; and two days before you arrived the Illingsworths and Captain Burrows both went earlier than they had intended—I'm certain, because this change in Isabel was spoiling their visit for them."

"She seems to get on remarkably well with Scheffer," remarked Trent.

"I know—it's extraordinary, but he seems more struck with her than ever."

"Well, he is; but in a lizard-hearted way of his own. He and I were talking just now after you left the dining-room. He spoke of Lady Bosworth in a queer, semi-scientific sort of way, saying she was very interesting to a medical man like himself. You didn't tell me he was one."

"I didn't know. George calls him an anthropologist, and disagrees with him about the races of Farther India. It's the one thing George does know something about, having lived there twelve years governing the poor things. They took to each other at once

when they met last year, and when I asked him to stay here he was quite delighted. He only begged to be allowed to bring his cockatoo, as it could not live without him."

"Strange pet for a man," Trent observed. "He was showing off its paces to me this afternoon. Well, it seems he's greatly interested in these attacks of hers. He has seen nothing quite like them. But he is convinced the thing is due to what he calls a toxic agent of some sort. As to what, or how, or why, he is absolutely at a loss."

"Mr. Scheffer really is a wonderful person," the lady said. "He's lived for years among the most appalling savages in Dutch New Guinea, doing scientific work for his Government, and according to George they treat him like a sort of god. He's most attractive and quite kind really, I think, but there's something about him that makes me afraid of him."

"What is it?"

"I think it is the frosty look in his eyes," replied Mrs. Lancey, drawing her shoulders together in a shiver.

"Perhaps that is the feeling about him in Dutch New Guinea," said Trent. "Did you tell me, Edith, that your sister began to be like this the very first evening she came here?"

"Yes. And it had never happened before, she declares."

"She came out from England with the Stones, didn't she?"

"Only the last part of the journey. They got on a train at Lucerne."

Trent looked back into the drawing-room at the wistful face of Mrs. Stone, who was playing piquet with her host. She was slight and pretty, with large, appealing eyes that never lost their melancholy, though she was always smiling.

"You say she loathes Lady Bosworth," he said. "Why?"

"Well, I suppose it's mainly Bella's own fault," confessed Mrs. Lancey, with a grimace. "You may as well know, Philip—you'll soon find out, anyhow—the truth is she *will* flirt with any man that she doesn't actively dislike. She's so brimful of life she can't hold herself in—or she won't, rather; she says there's no harm in it, and she doesn't care if there is. Several times she has practised on Randolph, and, although he's a perfectly safe old donkey if there ever was one, Agatha can't bear the sight of her."

"She seems quite friendly with her," Trent observed.

Mrs. Lancey produced through her delicate nostrils a sound that expressed a scorn for which there were no words.

"Well, what do you make of it, Philip?" his hostess asked, at length. "Myself, I simply don't know what to think. These queer fits of hers frighten me horribly. There's one dreadful idea, you see, that keeps occurring to me. Could it, perhaps, be"—Mrs.

Lancey lowered her already low tone—"the beginning of insanity?"

He spoke reassuringly. "Oh, I shouldn't cherish that fancy. There are other things much more likely and much less terrible. Look here, Edith, will you try to arrange certain things for tomorrow, without asking me why? And don't let anybody know I asked you to do it—not even George. Until later on, at least. Will you?"

"How exciting!" Mrs. Lancey breathed. "Yes, of course, mystery-man. What do you want me to do?"

"Do you think you could manage things tomorrow so that you and I and Lady Bosworth could go out in the motor-boat on the lake for an hour or two in the evening, getting back in time to change for dinner—just the three of us and the engineer?"

She pondered. "Then the three of us could run down in the boat to San Marmette—it's a lovely little place—and be back before seven. In this weather it's really the best time of day for the lake."

"That would do admirably, if you could work it. And one thing more—if we do go as you suggest, I want you privately to tell your engineer to do just what I ask him to do—no matter what it is."

Mrs. Lancey worked it without difficulty. At five o'clock the two ladies and Trent, with a powerful young man of superb manners at the steering-wheel, were gliding swiftly southward, mile after mile, down the long lake. They landed at the most picturesque, and perhaps the most dilapidated and dirtiest, of all the lakeside villages, where, in the tiny square above the landing-place, a score of dusky infants were treading the measures and chanting the words of one of the immemorial games of childhood. While Mrs. Lancey and her sister watched them in delight, Trent spoke rapidly to the young engineer, whose gleaming eyes and teeth flashed understanding.

Soon afterward they strolled through San Marmette, and up the mountain road to a little church, half a mile away, where a curious fresco could be seen.

It was close on half-past six when they returned, to be met by Giuseppe, voluble in excitement and apology. It appeared that while he had been fraternising with the keeper of the inn by the landing-place certain *triste individui* had, unseen by anyone, been tampering maliciously with the engine of the boat, and had poured handfuls of dust into the delicate mechanism. Mrs. Lancey, who had received a private nod from Trent, reproved him bitterly for leaving the boat, and asked how long it would take to get the engine working again.

Giuseppe, overwhelmed with contrition, feared that it might be a matter of hours. Questioned, he said that the public steamer had

arrived and departed twenty minutes since; the next one, the last of the day, was not due until after nine. Their excellencies could at least count on getting home by that, if the engine was not ready sooner. Questioned farther, he said that one could telephone from the post-office, and that food creditably cooked was to be had at the *trattoria*.

Lady Bosworth was delighted. She declared that she would not have missed this occasion for anything. She had come to approve highly of Trent, who had made himself excellent company, and she saw her way to being quite admirable, for she was in dancing spirits.

It was a more than cheerful dinner that they had under a canopy of vine-leaves on a tiny terrace overlooking the lake. Twilight came on unnoticed, and soon afterwards appeared the passenger-boat, by which, Giuseppe advising it, they decided to return. It was as they sought for places on the crowded upper deck that Mrs. Lancey put her hand on Trent's arm. "There hasn't been a sign of it all the evening," she whispered. "What does that mean?"

"It means," murmured Trent, "that Lady Bosworth was prevented, by the merest accident, from dining at home in the ordinary way."

It was not until the following afternoon that Trent found an opportunity of being alone with his hostess in the garden.

"She is perfectly delighted at having escaped it last night," said Mrs. Lancey. "She says she knew it would pass off, but she hasn't the least notion how she was cured. Nor have I."

"She isn't," replied Trent. "Last night was only a beginning, and we can't get her unexpectedly stranded for the evening every day. The next move can be made now, if you consent to it. Lady Bosworth will be out until this evening, I believe?"

"She's gone shopping in the town. What do you want to do?"

"I want you to take me up to her room, and there I want you to look very carefully through everything in the place—in every corner of every box and drawer and bag and cupboard—and show me anything you find that might—"

"I should hate to do that!" Mrs. Lancey interrupted him, her face flushing.

"You would hate much more to see your sister again this evening as she was every evening before last night. Look here, Edith; the position is simple enough. Every day, about seven, Lady Bosworth goes into that room in her normal state to dress for dinner. Every day she comes out of it apparently as she went in, but turns queer a little later. Now is there any other place than that room where the mischief could happen?"

Mrs. Lancey frowned furiously. For a few moments she stood carefully boring a hole in the gravel with one heel. Then, "Come along," she said, and led the way toward the house.

"Unless we take the floor up," said Mrs. Lancey, seating herself emphatically on the bed in her sister's room twenty minutes later, "there's nowhere else to look. I've taken everything out and pried into every hole and corner. There isn't a single lockable thing that is locked. There isn't a bottle or phial or pill-box or any sort to be found. So much for your suspicions. What interests you about that nail-polishing pad? You must have seen one before, surely."

"This ornamental design on hammered silver is very beautiful and original," replied Trent, abstractedly. "I have never seen anything quite like it."

"The same design is on the whole of the toilet-set," Mrs. Lancey observed tartly, "and it shows to least advantage on the manicure things. You are talking rubbish; and yet," she added slowly, "you are looking rather pleased with yourself."

Trent turned round slowly. "I'm only thinking. Whose are the rooms on each side of this, Edith?"

"This side, the Stones's; that side, Mrs. Scheffer's."

"Then I will go for a walk all alone and think some more. Good-bye."

Trent was not in the house when, three hours later, a rousing tumult broke out on the upper floor. Those below in the loggia heard first a piercing scream, then a clatter of feet on parquet flooring, then more sounds of feet, excited voices, other screams of harsh, inhuman quality, and a lively scuffling and banging. Mr. Scheffer, with a volley of guttural words of which it was easy to gather the general sense, headed the rush of the company upstairs.

"Gisko! Gisko!" he shouted, at the head of the stairway. There was another ear-splitting screech, and the cockatoo came scuttling and fluttering out of Lady Bosworth's room, pursued by three vociferating women servants. The bird's yellow crest was erect and quivering with agitation; it screeched furious defiance again as it leapt upon its master's outstretched wrist.

"Silence, devil!" exclaimed Mr. Scheffer, seizing it by the head and shaking it violently. "I know not how to apologise, Lancey," he declared. "The accursed bird has somehow slipped from his chain away. I left him in my room secure just before we had tea."

"Never mind, never mind!" replied his host, who seemed rather pleased than otherwise with this small diversion. "I don't suppose he's done any harm beyond frightening the women. Anything wrong, Edith?" he asked, as they approached the open door of the

bedroom, to which the ladies had already hurried. Lady Bosworth's maid was telling a voluble story.

"When she came in just now to get the room ready for Isabel to dress," Mrs. Lancey summarised, "she suddenly heard a voice say something, and saw the bird perched on top of the mirror, staring at her. It gave her such a shock that she dropped the water-can and fled; then the two other girls came and helped her, trying to drive it out. They hadn't the sense to send for Mr. Scheffer."

"Apologise, carrion!" commanded Gisko's master. The cockatoo uttered a string of Dutch words in a subdued croak. "He says he asks one thousand pardons, and he will sin no more," Mr. Scheffer translated. "Miserable brigand! Traitor!"

Lady Bosworth hurried out of her room.

"I won't hear the poor thing scolded like that," she protested. "How was he to know my maid would be frightened? He looks so wretched! Take him away, Mr. Scheffer, and cheer him up."

It was half an hour later that Mrs. Lancey came to her husband in his dressing-room.

"I must say Bella was very decent about Scheffer's horrid bird," she began. "Do you know what the little fiend had done?"

"No, my dear. I thought he had confined himself to frightening the maid out of her skin."

"Not at all. He had been having the time of his life. Bella saw at once that he had been up to mischief, but she pretended there was nothing. Now it turns out he has bitten the buttons off two pairs of gloves, chewed up a lot of hair-pins, and spoiled her pretty little manicure set. He's torn the lining out of the case, the silver handles are covered with beak-marks, two or three of the things he seems to have hidden somewhere, and the polishing-pad is a ruin."

"It's too bad!" declared Mr. Lancey, bending over a shoe.

"I believe you're laughing, George," said his wife coldly.

He began to do so audibly. "You must admit it's funny to think of the bird going solemnly through a programme of mischief like that. I wish I could have seen the little beggar at it. Well, we shall have to get Bella a new nail-outfit. I'm glad she held her tongue about it just now."

"Why?"

"Because, my dear, we don't ask people to the house to make them feel uncomfortable—especially foreigners."

"Bella wasn't thinking of your ideal of hospitality. She held her tongue because she's taken a fancy to Scheffer. But, George, how do you suppose the little pest got in? The window was shut, and Hignett declares the door was too, when she went to the room."

"Then I expect Hignett deceives herself. Anyway, what does it matter? What I am anxious about is your sister's little peculiarity. As I've told you, I don't at all like the look of her having been quite normal yesterday evening, the one evening when she was away from the house by accident. I really am feeling miserably depressed, Edith. What I'm dreading now is a repetition of the usual ghastly performance tonight."

But neither that night, nor any night after, was that performance repeated. Lady Bosworth, free now of all apprehension, renewed and redoubled the life of the little company. And the lips of Trent were obstinately sealed.

Three weeks later Trent was shown into the consulting-room of Sir Peregrine Bosworth. The famous physician was a tall, stooping man of exaggerated gauntness, narrow-jawed, and high-nosed. He was courteous of manner and smiled readily; but his face was set in unhappy lines.

"Will you sit down, Mr. Trent?" said Sir Peregrine. "You wrote that you wished to see me upon a private matter concerning myself. I am at a loss to imagine what it can be, but, knowing your name, I had no hesitation in making an appointment."

Trent inclined his head. "I am obliged to you, Sir Peregrine. The matter is really important, and also quite private—so private that no person whatever knows the material facts besides myself. I won't waste words. I have lately been staying with the Lanceys, whom you know, in Italy. Lady Bosworth was also a guest there. For some days before my arrival she had suffered each evening from a curious attack of lassitude and vacancy of mind. I don't know what it was. Perhaps you do."

Sir Peregrine, immovably listening, smiled grimly. "The description of symptoms is a little vague. I have heard nothing of this, I may say, from my wife."

"It always came on at a certain time of the day, and only then. That time was a few minutes after eight, at the beginning of dinner. The attack passed off gradually after two hours or so."

The physician laid his clenched hand on the table between them. "You are not a medical man, Mr. Trent, I believe. What concern have you with all this?" His voice was coldly hostile now.

"Lots," answered Trent briefly. Then he added, as Sir Peregrine got to his feet with a burning eye, "I know nothing of medicine, but I cured Lady Bosworth."

The other sat down again suddenly. His open hands fell upon

the table and his dark face became very pale. "You—" he began with difficulty.

"I and no other, Sir Peregrine. And in a curiously simple way. I found out what was causing the trouble, and without her knowledge I removed it. It was—oh, the devil!" Trent exclaimed in a lower tone. For Sir Peregrine Bosworth, with a brow gone suddenly white and clammy, had first attempted to rise and then sunk forward with his head on the table.

Trent, who had seen such things before, hurried to him, pulled his chair from the table, and pressed his head down to his knees. Within a minute the stricken man was leaning back in his chair. He inspired deeply from a small bottle he had taken from his pocket.

"You have been overworking, perhaps," Trent said. "Something is wrong. I think I had better not—"

Sir Peregrine had pulled himself together. "I know very well what is wrong with me, sir," he interrupted brusquely. "It is my business to know. That will not happen again. I wish to hear what you have to say before you leave this house."

"Very well." Trent took a tone of colourless precision. "I was asked by Lady Bosworth's sister, Mrs. Lancey, to help in trying to trace the source of the disorder which attacked her every evening. I need not describe the signs of it, and I will not trouble you with an account of how I reasoned on the matter. But I found out that Lady Bosworth was, on these occasions, under the influence of a drug, which had the effect of lowering her vitality and clogging her brain, without producing stupefaction or sleep; and I was led to the conclusion that she was administering this drug to herself without knowing it."

He paused, and felt in his waistcoat pocket. "When Mrs. Lancey and I were making a search for something of the kind in her room, my attention was caught by the fine workmanship of a manicure set on the dressing-table. I took up the little round box meant to contain nail-polishing paste, admiring its shape and decoration, and on looking inside it found it half-full of paste. But I have often watched the process of beautifying finger-nails, and it seemed to me that the stuff was of a deeper red than the usual pink confection; and I saw next that the polishing-pad of the set, though well-worn, had never been used with paste, which leaves a sort of dark incrustation on the pad. Yet it was evident that the paste in the little box had been used. It is useful, sometimes, you see, to have a mind that notices trifles. So I jumped to the conclusion that the paste that was not employed as nail-polish was employed for some other purpose; and when I reached that point I simply put

the box in my pocket and went away with it. I may say that Mrs. Lancey knew nothing of this, or of what I did afterwards."

"And what was that?" Sir Peregrine appeared now to be following the story with an ironic interest.

"Naturally, knowing nothing of such matters, I took it to the place that called itself 'English Pharmacy' in the town, and asked the proprietor what the stuff was. He looked at it, took a little on his finger, smelt it, and said it was undoubtedly lip-salve.

"It was then I remembered how, when I saw Lady Bosworth during one of her attacks, her lips were brilliantly red, though all the colour had departed from her face. That had struck me as very odd, because I am a painter, and naturally I could not miss an abnormality like that. Then I remembered another thing. One evening, when Lady Bosworth, her sister, and myself were prevented from returning to the house for dinner, and dined at a country inn, there had been no signs of her trouble; but I had noticed that she moistened her lips again and again with her tongue."

"You are observant," remarked Sir Peregrine dispassionately and again had recourse to his smelling-bottle.

"You are good enough to say so," Trent replied, with a wooden face. "On thinking these things over, it seemed to me probably that Lady Bosworth was in the habit of putting on a little lip-salve when she dressed for dinner in the evening; perhaps finding that her lips at that time of day tended to become dry, or perhaps not caring to use it in daylight, when its presence would be much more easily detected. For I had learned that she made some considerable parade of not using any kind of cosmetics or artificial aids to beauty; and that, of course, accounted for her carrying it in a box meant for manicure-paste, which might be represented as merely a matter of cleanliness, and at any rate was not be classed with paint and powder. It was not pleasant to me to have surprised this innocent little deception; but it was as well that I did so, for I soon ascertained beyond doubt that the stuff had been tampered with.

"When I left the chemist's I went and sat in a quiet corner of the Museum grounds. There I put the least touch of the salve on my tongue, and awaited results. In five minutes I had lost all power of connected thought or will; I no longer felt any interest in my own experiment. I was conscious. I felt no discomfort, and no loss of the power of movement. Only my intelligence seemed to be paralysed. For an hour I was looking out upon the world with the soul of an ox, placid and blank."

Trent now opened his fingers and showed a little round box of

hammered silver, with a delicate ornamentation running round the lid. It was of about the bigness of a pill-box.

"It seemed best to me that this box should simply disappear, and in some quite natural, unsuspecting way. Merely to remove the salve would have drawn Lady Bosworth's attention to it and set her guessing. She did not suspect the stuff as yet, I was fully convinced; and I thought it well that the affair of her seizures should remain a mystery. Your eyes ask why. Just because I did not want a painful scandal in Mrs. Lancey's family—we are old friends, you see. And now here I am with the box, and neither Lady Bosworth nor any other person has the smallest inkling of its crazy secret but you and I."

He stopped again and looked in Sir Peregrine's eyes. They remained fixed upon him with the gaze of a statue.

"It was plain, of course," Trent continued, "that someone had got at the stuff immediately before she went out to Italy, or immediately on her arrival. The attacks began on the first evening there, two hours after reaching the house. Therefore any tampering with the salve after her arrival was practically impossible. When I asked myself who could have tampered with it before Lady Bosworth left this house to go out to Italy, I was led to form a very unpleasant conjecture."

Sir Peregrine stirred in his chair. "You had been told the truth—or a part of the truth—about our married life, I suppose?"

Trent inclined his head. "Three days ago I arrived in London, and showed a little of this paste to a friend of mine who is an expert analyst. He has sent me a report, which I have here." He handed an envelope across the table. "He was deeply interested in what he found, but I have not satisfied his curiosity. He found the salve to be evenly impregnated with a very slight quantity of a rare alkaloid body called 'purvisine.' Infinitesimal doses of it produce effects on the human organism which he describes, as I can testify, with considerable accuracy. It was discovered, he notes, by Henry Purvis twenty-five years ago; and you will remember, Sir Peregrine, what I only found out by enquiry—that you were assistant to Purvis about that time in Edinburgh, where he had the Chair of medical jurisprudence and toxicology."

He ceased to speak, and there was a short silence. Sir Peregrine gazed at the table before him. Once or twice he drew breath deeply, and at length began to speak calmly.

"I shall not waste words," he said, "in trying to explain fully my state of mind or my action in this matter. But I will tell you enough for your imagination to do the rest. My feeling for my wife was an infatuation from the beginning, and is still. I was too old

for her. I don't think now that she ever cared for me greatly; but she was too strong-minded ever to marry a wealthy fool. By the time we had been married a year I could no longer hide from myself that she had an incurable weakness for philandering. She has surrendered herself to it with less and less restraint, and without any attempt to deceive me on the subject. If I tried to tell you what torture it has been to me, you wouldn't understand. The worst was when she was away from me, staying with her friends. At length I took the step you know. It was undeniably an act of baseness, and we will leave it at that, if you please. If you should ever suffer as I do, you will modify your judgment upon me. I knew of my wife's habit, discovered by you, of using lip-salve at her evening toilette. On the night before her departure I took what was in that box and combined it with a preparation of the drug purvisine. The infinitesimal amount which would pass into the mouth after the application of the salve was calculated to produce for an hour or two the effects you have described, without otherwise doing any harm. But I knew the impression that would be produced upon normal men and women by the sight of anyone in such a state. I wanted to turn her attractiveness into repulsiveness, and I seem to have succeeded. I was mad when I did it. I have been aghast at my own action ever since. I am glad it has been frustrated. And now I should like to know what you intend to do."

Trent took up the box. "If you agree, Sir Peregrine, I shall drop this from Westminster Bridge tonight. And so long as nothing of the sort is practised again, the whole affair shall be buried. Yours is a wretched story, and I don't suppose any of us would find our moral fibre improved by such a situation. I have no more to say."

He rose and moved to the door. Sir Peregrine rose also and stood with lowered eyes, apparently deep in thought.

"I am obliged to you, Mr. Trent," he said, formally. "I may say, too, that your account of your proceedings interested me deeply. I should like to ask a question. How did you contrive that the box should disappear without its owner seeing anything remarkable in its absence?"

"Oh, easily," Trent replied, his hand on the door-knob. "After experimenting on myself, I went back to the house before tea-time, when no one happened to be in. I went upstairs to a room where a cockatoo was kept—a mischievous brute—took him off his chain, and carried him into Lady Bosworth's room. There I put him on the dressing-table, and teased him a little with the manicure things to interest him in them. Then I took away one of the pairs of scissors, so that the box shouldn't be the one thing miss-

ing, and left him shut in there to do his worst, while I went out of the house again. When I went he was ripping out the silk lining of the case, and had chewed up the silver handles of the things pretty well. After I had gone he went on to destroy various other things. In the riot that took place when he was found, the disappearance of the little box and scissors became a mere detail. Certainly Lady Bosworth suspected nothing.

"I suppose," he added, thoughtfully, "that occasion would be the only time a cockatoo was of any particular use."

And Trent went out. ♪

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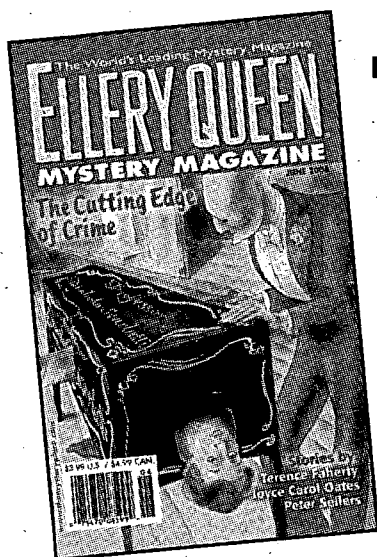
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THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Monica Clark of Shipshewana, Indiana. Honorable mentions go to Jean Majury of Mercer Island, Washington; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Sharon Near of Puyallup, Washington; Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; James Harris of Haywards Heath, West Sussex, United Kingdom; Randall A. Martin of Topeka, Kansas; and Tony Lewis of Redwater, Texas.



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A PRICKLY FIGURE

MONICA CLARK

Like watching a slow-motion movie, I saw the shriveled hand before I felt it reach up and slap my face. Skin so thin, so translucent and spider-veined you could see the white bones underneath. The hand belonged to a short, ancient-looking Navajo woman. Her small, wizened face looked like one of the flying monkeymen from Oz. I turned, quickly buttoning up my Levi's.

This afternoon, after a six-pack of Budweiser, driving across the desert had seemed like a great idea—and it was, until Nature called. I pulled the truck over and stagger-stumbled into this canyon, barely missing a waist-high cactus. I had just finished answering the call when she smacked me.

She came out of nowhere, glaring with powerful black eyes, jabbing my chest hard with one bony finger, and pointing until I saw it on the desert floor.

A huge circle, perfectly shaped with geometric patterns in fine, colored sand, the intricate design primitive yet artful. It was perfect except for where I . . . well . . . you know.

"Oh, jeez lady, I'm sorry." I held my arms up trying to apologize, but she wasn't listening. The chant started slowly at first, guttural and old. The wind picked up. A cold chill ran over me and then . . . I don't remember.

Next thing I knew, she was gone. It's like a bad dream except I can't wake up, can't move. All I can do is watch the wind slowly carry away the tiny bits of colored sand.

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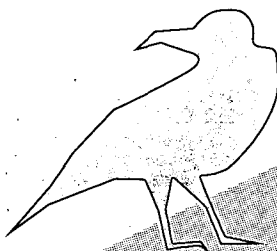
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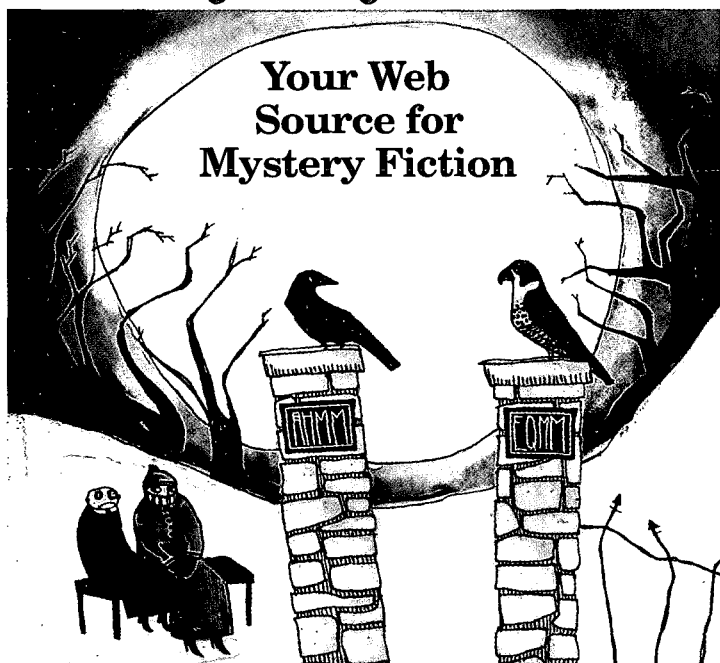
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